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Edited by Carolin Fuchs, Cecilia Kennedy, and H. Müge Satar

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From telecollaboration to virtual exchange: state-of-the-art and the role of UNICollaboration in moving forward¹

Robert O'Dowd²

Abstract

Telecollaboration, or 'virtual exchange', are terms used to refer to the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes. In recent years, approaches to virtual exchange have evolved in different contexts and different areas of education, and these approaches have had, at times, very diverse organisational structures and pedagogical objectives. This article provides an overview of the different models and approaches to virtual exchange which are currently being used in higher education contexts. It also provides a short historical review of the major developments and trends in virtual exchange to date and describes the origins of the UNICollaboration organisation and the rationale behind this journal.

Keywords: virtual exchange; telecollaboration; online intercultural exchange; computer mediated communication; intercultural communication; internationalisation.

1. Parts of this article were previously published in an article by the same author (O'Dowd, 2017) which appeared in the *TLC Journal - Training Language & Culture*, 4(2). They have been reproduced with permission.

2. University of León, León, Spain; robert.odowd@unileon.es

Robert O'Dowd has published widely on the application of collaborative online learning in university education. His most recent publication is the co-edited volume *Online Intercultural Exchange Policy, Pedagogy, Practice*, for Routledge. He is currently the lead researcher on the Erasmus+ KA3 project, *Evaluating and Upscaling Telecollaborative Teacher Education (EVALUATE)* (<http://www.evaluateproject.eu/>). He was the founding president of the UNICollaboration organisation (www.unicollaboration.org).

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1. Introduction

The launch of a [UNICollaboration](#) academic journal is a significant event for many reasons. First of all, it is the first journal which is exclusively dedicated to the research and practice of pedagogically-structured online collaborative learning initiatives between people in different cultural contexts or geographical locations. Second, the journal represents an attempt to create a cross-disciplinary approach to virtual exchange practise and research.

Although the origins of the [UNICollaboration](#) organisation may lie firmly in the fields of applied linguistics and foreign language education, the colleagues working in this initiative are keenly aware that virtual exchange offers learning benefits which are relevant to learners across all disciplines. We are also aware that there are many exciting virtual exchange initiatives underway in contexts outside of foreign language education (see, for example, the [X-Culture](#) and [Collaborative Online International Learning](#) (COIL) models described later in this paper) and that both the practice and research of virtual exchange will benefit from a cross-disciplinary approach.

This article begins by looking at some of the issues in the terminology and definitions in the area, before moving on to give an overview of the different models and approaches to virtual exchange which are currently being used in higher education contexts. It also carries out a short historical review of the major trends and advances in virtual exchange to date and concludes by looking at recent developments and addressing some of the challenges and barriers which practitioners and researchers continue to encounter.

2. Terminology and definitions

Over the past three decades, approaches to virtual exchange have evolved in different contexts and different areas of education, and these approaches have happened, to a great extent, in blissful isolation of one another. One of the results of this has been that the activity has assumed different monikers and terminology depending on the educational context and the pedagogical focus of its practitioners. For example, over the past number of years, different incarnations of the activity have been referred to as telecollaboration ([Belz, 2001](#); [Warschauer, 1996](#)), online intercultural exchange ([O'Dowd, 2007](#); [O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016](#)), virtual exchange ([Helm, 2015](#)), (COIL) ([Rubin, 2016](#); [Schultheis Moore & Simon, 2015](#)), internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education ([Belz & Thorne, 2006](#)), globally networked learning environments ([Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008](#)), and e-tandem ([O'Rourke, 2007](#)) or teletandem ([Leone & Telles, 2016](#)).

This mushroom-like emergence of virtual exchange initiatives in different academic areas using different terminology has had both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, it has meant that the basic methodology of pedagogically-structured online collaborative learning between groups of learners in different cultural contexts or geographical locations has been applied in a myriad of ways and has been shown to be adaptable to different pedagogical objectives and learning contexts.

However, the heterogeneity of the activity has meant that practitioners and researchers focussing on one form of virtual exchange (for example, telecollaborative learning in foreign language education) have been unaware of the practices and the research outcomes of similar initiatives in other areas of education (and vice versa). It is striking, for example, that [Starke-Meyerring and Wilson \(2008\)](#) in their volume on globally networked learning environments lament that their potential “to inspire multilingual interaction as well as language learning remains yet to be explored” (p. 225). For authors to suggest this is the case at a time when a huge body of research and practice literature already existed about foreign language approaches to virtual exchange (e.g. [Belz, 2001, 2003](#); [Warschauer, 1995, 1996](#)) simply demonstrates the lack of communication and collaboration which exists between researchers in this field.

A second challenge of the multiple approaches and terminology has been the resulting difficulty in promoting and disseminating the activity among educators and decision makers who are unfamiliar with the concept. [Rubin \(2016\)](#), one of the pioneers of the [COIL](#) initiatives in the US, regrets that “[o]ne of the problematics of this format is that it is called by so many different names, thereby making it harder for the practice to be more commonly understood and implemented” (p. 263).

It is against this background that the original architects of the [UNICollaboration](#) organisation and their collaborators from other initiatives have struggled with the challenge of finding terminology that will be acceptable to as many practitioners and researchers as possible. As mentioned above, the majority of the colleagues originally involved in this initiative come from the field of foreign language education, and the bulk of publications and presentations in this field have referred to the activity as *telecollaboration*. However, outside this field, the term telecollaboration is largely unknown, and to many ears it is likely to sound quite dated and opaque.

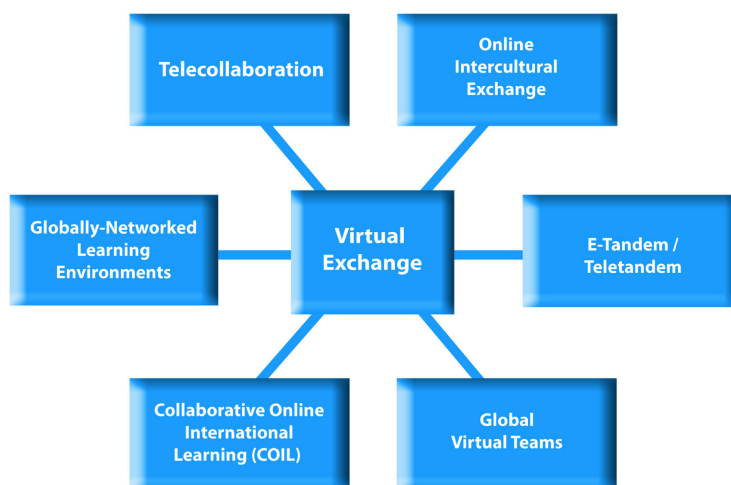
While the term *telecollaboration* is being questioned in some quarters, the term *virtual exchange* seems to be used increasingly in a wide range of contexts. Not only is it the preferred term of educational organisations such as [Soliya](#) and [Sharing Perspectives](#), but it is also the term being used by foundations and governmental and intergovernmental bodies such as the [Stevens Initiative](#), the [Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs](#) in the US, and the European Commission. The following

quotation by the European Commissioner Tibor Navracsics on the 12th of July 2016, where he discusses expanding the pre-existing Erasmus+ physical mobility programmes, highlights the growth in awareness among policy makers in Europe to the activity and to the term *virtual exchange*:

“I want to complement [Erasmus+] with virtual youth exchanges. These would allow young people from the EU and neighbourhood countries to learn about and understand cultural differences, while improving their soft skills, including foreign languages and teamwork. I want to involve 2,000 young people in this ‘Erasmus Virtual Exchange pilot project’ by the end of 2017, and 200,000 young people by the end of 2019” (Navracsics, 2016, cited in European Commission, 2017, p. 24).

Therefore, in order to reflect both our origins in foreign language telecollaborative research and practice and also our future as an international, cross-disciplinary organisation open to collaboration with policy and research initiatives, our academic organisation was named **UNICollaboration** – *the Cross-Disciplinary Organisation for Telecollaboration and Virtual Exchange in Higher Education*. This, I believe, recognises the validity of the huge amount of research which has been carried out under the title of ‘telecollaboration’, but also will help to establish ‘virtual exchange’ as an umbrella term for our field of practice. Figure 1 provides an overview of the main terminology used in this area and situates virtual exchange as a compromise umbrella term to cover all these approaches³.

Figure 1. An overview of terminology used to refer to virtual exchange initiatives



3. However, it is important to differentiate between virtual mobility and virtual exchange. While virtual exchange refers to the different approaches to online intercultural exchange projects in education, virtual mobility refers to students using online platforms and tools to take courses at a distant university.

It is worth noting that the term *virtual exchange* does not lend itself for use as an adjective, and for that reason, I find the use of the adjective *telecollaborative* in cases such as *telecollaborative interaction* and *telecollaborative learning outcomes* as being more accurate than, merely, *virtual interaction* and *virtual learning outcomes* – which may imply something which occurs online but not necessarily as part of a virtual exchange initiative.

In relation to defining what virtual exchange actually involves, there are probably as many definitions as there are terms. However, the elements which appear to be common to most interpretations of Virtual Exchange initiatives are reflected in the following: virtual exchange involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators. This is perhaps a more limiting definition than that offered by the [Virtual Exchange Coalition](#), which states that “virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education [programmes]”, and it may also risk excluding models which operate outside of formal education. However, I believe it captures the essential commonalities of the models of virtual exchange which will be looked at in the following section.

3. Differing approaches to virtual exchange

The first examples of online collaborative projects between classrooms around the globe began to appear within a few years of the emergence of the internet. Early reports include the work of [Tella \(1991\)](#), the Orillas Network ([Cummins & Sayers, 1995](#)), the AT&T Learning Circles ([Riel, 1997](#)), as well as more in-depth research studies into foreign language exchanges ([Eck, Legenhausen, & Wolff, 1995](#)). The publication *Virtual Connections: Online Activities for Networking Language Learners* ([Warschauer, 1995](#)) included a collection of ‘cross-cultural communication’ projects which reported on foreign language students creating personal profiles, carrying out surveys, and examining cultural stereotypes with distant partners. Around this time, a number of websites, including Intercultural Email Classroom Connections (IECC) and e-tandem, also became available online in order to link up classrooms across the globe and to provide practitioners with activities and guidelines for their projects. The IECC LISTSERV was established by university professors at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, US, and functioned as one of the first ‘matching services’ for teachers who wanted to connect their students in email exchanges with partner classes in other countries and in other regions of their own country. Between 1992 and 2001, IECC distributed over 28,000 requests for email partnerships ([Rice, 2005](#)). The e-tandem server was aimed at matching learners of foreign languages and was supported by a network of research and project work carried at Bochum University in Germany and

Trinity College in Dublin (O'Rourke, 2007). Meanwhile, practitioners such as Ruth Vilmi in Finland and Reinhard Donath in Germany helped to make the activity better known by publishing practical reports of their students' work online. Vilmi's (1994) work focussed on online collaboration between technical students at universities across Europe, while Donath provided German secondary school foreign language teachers with a wide range of resources and information about how projects could be integrated into the curriculum (Donath & Volkmer, 1997).

One possible categorisation of the different initiatives involves differentiating between subject-specific virtual exchanges, shared syllabus approaches, and service-provider approaches. Each of these will now be looked at in some detail (Table 1).

Table 1. Different approaches to virtual exchange in higher education

Approach to virtual exchange	Associated terminology and well-known examples	Main Characteristics	Current situation
Subject-specific virtual exchange (1): Foreign language learning initiatives	Common Terminology: "Telecollaboration", "Online intercultural exchange" "E-tandem" "Teletandem" Examples: Cultura Teletandem	Development of foreign language competence, intercultural communicative competence and digital competence Practitioner-led initiatives Often bilingual	A large body of research and practice publications An online platform for finding partnerships, tasks and training: www.unicollaboration.eu Recent establishment of an academic organisation – UNICollaboration
Subject-specific virtual exchange (2): Business studies initiatives	Common Terminology: "Global virtual teams" Examples: X-Culture	Preparation of online intercultural skills necessary for the workplace Practitioner-led initiatives Data from exchanges shared for research purposes	Growing body of research and practice publications Growing community of practice: http://x-culture.org/
Service-provider approaches	Common Terminology: These were the first initiatives to coin the term "Virtual exchange" Examples: iEarn Global Nomads Soliya Sharing Perspectives	Development of intercultural awareness, critical thinking, and digital literacies Facilitator-led exchanges 'Outsourced' by universities to service-providers who provide platform, partners etc.	Many of the organisations are working together in the Virtual Exchange Coalition

Shared syllabus approaches	<p>Common Terminology: “COIL” “Globally networked learning environments”</p> <p>Example: COIL Institute for Globally Networked Learning in the Humanities (COIL)</p>	<p>Addition of international perspectives to course syllabus</p> <p>Development of digital competence and intercultural competence</p> <p>Often classes develop a ‘shared syllabus’</p>	<p>In the US: COIL Institute for Globally Networked Learning in the Humanities</p>
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3.1. Subject-specific virtual exchange (1): e-tandem, telecollaboration, and other foreign language learning initiatives

It is not surprising that one of the disciplines to most eagerly take up virtual exchange as a learning tool has been foreign language education. From the beginnings of the internet in the early 1990’s, foreign language educators have seen the potential of connecting language learners with counterparts in other countries in order to engage them in interaction with speakers of other languages and to give them semi-authentic experiences of communicating in these languages.

In foreign language education, virtual exchange has been referred to principally as *telecollaboration* (Belz, 2003), *telecollaboration 2.0* (Guth & Helm, 2010), *e-tandem* (O’Rourke, 2007) or *online intercultural exchange* (O’Dowd, 2007; O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016), and over the past 20 years it has gone on to become an integral part of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or Network-Based Language Teaching (NBLT) (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2008).

Virtual exchange in foreign language education has traditionally taken the form of one of two models – each one reflecting the principal learning approaches prevalent in foreign language education at the time. The first well-known model was e-tandem, which focussed on fostering learner autonomy and learners’ ability to continue their language learning outside of the language classroom. The second model is usually referred to as *intercultural telecollaboration* or online intercultural exchange (O’Dowd, 2007) and reflects the emphasis in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s on intercultural and sociocultural aspects of foreign language education.

In the e-tandem model (O’Rourke, 2007), two native speakers of different languages communicate together with the aim of learning the other’s language, and messages are typically written 50% in the target and 50% in the native language, thereby providing each partner with an opportunity to practise their target language and, at the same time, provide their partner with authentic input.

These exchanges are also based on the principle of autonomy, and the responsibility for a successful exchange rests mainly with the learners, who are expected to provide feedback on their partners' content and/or on their foreign language performance. In this sense, tandem partners take on the role of peer tutors who interact together about both content and linguistic issues, proposing to their partners, when appropriate, alternative formulations in the target language. The role of the class teacher in the e-tandem model is usually minimal. For example, learners are often encouraged to take on responsibility for finding their own themes for discussion, correcting their partners' errors, and keeping a learner diary or portfolio to reflect on their own learning progress.

The example below of an American student writing an email to her partner in Spain illustrates many of the key aspects of a typical e-tandem⁴. The American student begins by writing in English and talking to her Spanish partner for his recent message. She then takes on the role of peer-tutor and provides some corrections of Pablo's English. Although she does not provide detailed grammatical feedback, she is able to suggest alternative formulations and she is sure to praise him for his writing in his foreign language. In the second part of the message, she then takes on the role of Spanish learner and tells her partner about student life in New York. It is likely that in the following message, Pablo will respond to Elena, providing some corrections to her Spanish and continuing the conversation.

Hey Pablo!

It was great to receive your letter. I was so happy to see that you responded to my questions. Thank you. Your responses were very informative and definitely showed me that family life in Spain was not all I'd expected it to be (I was surprised, for example, that your family is not religious. I assumed that most families in Spain are, and I'm sure you have many assumptions about life in America as well).

Your English is very good. There are only a few problems that I have to correct. Some of your sentences are too long, and would make more sense if you separated them into two or three sentences instead. For example, "*My parents are not divorced in Spain there are very few cases of divorced*" could be rewritten as "*My parents are not divorced. In Spain there are very few cases of divorce*". Your letter was great and made sense despite these things. Good work.

Las fiestas en the ciudad de Nueva York son muy locas y emocionantes. Voy a las discotecas con mis amigas los jueves, los viernes, o los sabados. Vamos a los bars tambien. Nosotros volvemos a nos salons de dormitorio a las cuatro de la manana. Queremos bailar a las

4. Example taken from author's research data (reprinted with permission from the participant).

discotecas. Necesita tener veintiuno años por beber el alcohol pero la mayoría de estudiantes en las universidades tienen los “fake IDs” y ellos beben el alcohol...

Although the model is now over 20 years old, e-tandem continues to be a very popular form of virtual exchange in foreign language education. A large amount of research on the outcomes of e-tandem learning continues to appear in the literature (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011). Browsing the many partner-searches which appear on the <http://uni-collaboration.eu/> platform for class matching reveals that many practitioners continue to look for e-tandem style exchanges. In the first example below, a teacher looks for partners for a Portuguese-English e-tandem exchange (Figure 2), while in the second example a teacher of Spanish as a foreign language is looking for a partner class of native speakers of Spanish and (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Portuguese-English e-tandem exchange⁵

Basic information	Languages & competences
<p>This telecollaboration project in the area of Portuguese L2 can be a tandem project involving English and Portuguese languages or any other kind of telecollaboration that meets the objectives. Our objectives are to increase oral competences in both languages and develop cultural awareness through oral (and written) discussions about topics of cultural interest.</p> <p>Study programme: Bachelor in South East Asian Cultures</p> <p>Number of students: 10</p> <p>Preferred start date of exchange: Mon, 26/01/2015</p>	





Figure 3. Teacher of Spanish looking for a partner class of native speakers of Spanish⁶

Basic information	Languages & competences
<p>This course is for students in their 3rd year of university Spanish study. The focus of the course is on developing oral communication and listening skills to improve fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. I am looking for a similar class learning English to collaborate with for a tandem-style language exchange.</p> <p>Study programme: Spanish</p> <p>Number of students: 25</p> <p>Preferred start date of exchange: Tue, 15/09/2015</p>	



5. <http://www.unicollaboration.eu/node/1073>

6. <http://www.unicollaboration.eu/node/1125>

In the late 1990's, a second model or approach to Virtual Exchange in foreign language education began to appear which was characterised by a stronger focus on intercultural aspects of language learning and communication and by a greater integration of the online exchanges into classroom activity. This form of virtual exchange was to become broadly known as 'telecollaboration'. The term was coined by Mark Warschauer (1996) in his publication *Telecollaboration and the Foreign Language Learner*, and a special edition of the journal *Language Learning & Technology* was dedicated to the subject in 2003 where Belz identified the main characteristics of foreign language telecollaboration to be "institutionalised, electronically mediated intercultural communication under the guidance of a languacultural expert (i.e. a teacher) for the purposes of foreign language learning and the development of intercultural competence" (Belz, 2003, p. 2).

The telecollaborative model of virtual exchange strives to integrate the online interaction comprehensively into the students' foreign language programmes and involves international class-to-class partnerships in which intercultural projects and tasks are developed by the partner teachers in the collaborating institutions. For example, students' face-to-face contact classes with their teachers are where online interaction and products (e.g. videos, blogs, etc.) are prepared, analysed, and reflected upon with the guidance of the teacher. Foreign language telecollaboration also places the emphasis of the exchanges on developing intercultural awareness and other aspects of intercultural communicative competence, in addition to developing linguistic competence (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001).

There is great variety in the types of tasks which educators have used to develop intercultural approaches to telecollaboration. Some of the better known tasks involved requiring students to work together with their international partners to produce websites or presentations based on comparisons of their cultures. Belz (2002), for example, reports on a US-German exchange which involved developing a website which contained bilingual essays and a bilingual discussion of a cultural theme such as racism or family. Another popular intercultural task for telecollaborative exchanges has been the analysis of parallel texts. Belz (2005) defines parallel texts as "linguistically different renditions of a particular story or topic in which culturally-conditioned varying representations of that story or topic are presented" (n.p.). Popular examples of parallel texts which have been used in telecollaborative exchanges include the American film *Three men and a baby* and the French original *Trois hommes et un couffin*.

A further intercultural task adapted to telecollaboration was the application of ethnographic interviewing in synchronous online sessions. O'Dowd (2006) trained a group of German English as a foreign language students in the basic techniques of ethnographic interviewing, and the students then carried out interviews with American informants in the US using group-to-group video

conferencing sessions and one-to-one email exchanges before writing up reflective essays on their findings. The combination of synchronous and asynchronous tools allowed the students to develop different aspects of their intercultural competence. Video conferencing was seen as developing students' abilities to interact with members of the target culture under the constraints of real-time communication and to also elicit, through a face-to-face dialogue, the concepts and values which underlie their partners' behaviour and their opinions. However, email was employed to both send and receive much more detailed information on the two cultures' products and practices as seen from the partners' perspectives. In other words, email was suited to foster cultural knowledge, while video conferencing supported the development of students' intercultural negotiating skills.

The end of the 2010's has seen foreign language virtual exchange gradually diverge into two paths. The first of these paths leads telecollaborative exchanges away from formal language learning and the definition of virtual exchange presented in these pages. Instead, it engages learners in language and cultural learning experiences by immersing them in specialised online interest communities or environments that focus on specific hobbies or interests. [Thorne \(2010\)](#) describes this form of telecollaborative learning as "intercultural communication in the wild" (p. 144) and speculates that it may be "situated in arenas of social activity that are less controllable than classroom or organised online intercultural exchanges might be, but which present interesting, and perhaps even compelling, opportunities for intercultural exchange, agentive action, and meaning making" (p. 144).

The second, alternative path in foreign language virtual exchange involves attempts to integrate telecollaborative networks more comprehensively in formal education. The argument here is that if virtual exchange is such a valuable learning experience, then it should not be used as an 'add-on' activity but rather as a recognised, credit-carrying activity which is valued and supported by university management. Based on this belief, reports have emerged of how universities are integrating virtual exchange into their study programmes ([O'Dowd, 2013](#)), using alternative credit systems for students' telecollaborative work ([Hauck & MacKinnon, 2016](#)), and developing competence models for telecollaborative learning ([Dooly, 2016](#)) and for teachers engaged in telecollaborative exchanges ([O'Dowd, 2015](#)).

3.2. Subject-specific virtual exchange (2): X-culture and other business studies initiatives

Another discipline which has recognised the relevance and potential of virtual exchange is business studies, in particular in the areas of international business and international marketing. In modern business contexts, online communication is widely considered as offering a cost effective way of conducting business, as a manner to reduce power differences in team work, and to enable physically disadvantaged employees to have greater access to the virtual environment than the physical

workspace (Heller, Laurito, & Johnson, 2010). As online communication becomes increasingly common in many organisations, a growing number of educators are looking to virtual exchange as a tool to prepare students of business studies to successfully work and collaborate online with colleagues and customers in other locations. The central interest here is in developing in students the necessary competences to work in what are commonly described as Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) and to give them first-hand experience in online international collaboration in professional contexts. GVTs are defined as “geographically dispersed teams that use internet-mediated communication to collaborate on common goals, and typically consist of members who have diverse cultural backgrounds and who have not previously worked together in face-to-face settings” (Taras et al., 2013, p. 415).

A review of practice in this area would suggest that virtual exchange initiatives are, in comparison to foreign language telecollaboration, relatively scarce and under-researched, but the reports that do exist provide an insight into how virtual exchange is being introduced into the discipline. Duus and Cooray (2014), for example, describe a project for students of marketing which brings together business students in the UK and India to take part in a simulation which involves working in online virtual teams and setting up a new business in India. Lindner (2016) reports on an exchange between business studies students at the University of Paderborn in Germany and Masaryk University in Brno in the Czech Republic which involved students collaborating online with their international partners to create a website which compared a product, service, or managerial innovation across two cultures. Osland et al. (2004) present the *Globally Distant Multiple Teams* project which brought groups of German, Austrian, and American students together in virtual teams in online communication using emails, chat rooms, and other online communication tools. Students were asked to prepare a report or develop a website comparing a product, service, or organisational feature across their countries. For example, one group compared differing marketing approaches and consumer attitudes related to soft drinks in Germany and the US.

However, probably the largest virtual exchange initiative emerging from business studies is the *X-Culture* project. *X-Culture* was launched in 2010 by Dr. Vas Taras of University of North Carolina at Greensboro, US, when he began to look for a partner class for his international business course and realised the interest among colleagues in such online collaborative projects. In the first year of exchanges, universities from seven countries took part in *X-Culture* exchanges, but by 2015, almost 4,000 master's and undergraduate students from over 100 universities in 40 countries were participating in the initiative. Since 2013, a number of companies have worked together with *X-Culture* to provide real-life business challenges as the focus for the virtual exchanges. Taras believes that the cooperation with the business community makes the initiative more practical and motivating for students, and also provides the corporate partners with creative solutions to their challenges (personal correspondence, 26th of June, 2017).

The model works in the following way: students from the participating classes are put into GVTs which usually involve six students from different countries. They are then assigned real international business challenges such as designing a marketing strategy for a company which is collaborating with X-Culture. These challenges usually involve different tasks such as carrying out a survey of key stakeholders, an industry and competition analysis, and market selection and analysis, etc.

The students then spend the semester working on those assignments. Teachers receive regular reports on students' work and progress and, upon successful completion of the exchange, students receive X-Culture certificates. Although the requirements and deadlines of the final report are outlined in detail, the international student teams are allowed to choose their online communication tools and can decide themselves about how to coordinate their team work and how the workload should be distributed. In reference to the decision not to use one specific online platform for the exchanges, Taras explains:

“We made a decision not to use a proprietary platform [e.g. Moodle, Canvas, etc.] for communication. Instead, we provide our students with a training on how to use the available online collaboration and communication platforms, such as Dropbox, Google Docs, Slack, Trello, and the like. The students can choose to communicate only via email or Skype, but we teach them how to use these more powerful and free platforms and most teams use these more advanced tools. The logic here is that (1) there is no point in trying to develop our own platform when there are [a] number of extremely powerful tools [that] are already available, and (2) we want our students to be able to use the tools they used in X-Culture even after the project is over” (personal correspondence, 26th of June, 2017).

The model is based on an interesting combination of services provided by the X-Culture platform itself and the work of the teachers who have involved their students in the exchange. For example, although most of the coordination, online communication, and performance monitoring are managed centrally by X-Culture, teachers are asked to regularly communicate with their students and provide coaching and guidance. Teachers are also expected to integrate the exchange into their normal teaching and to devote a small amount of time in each lecture to discuss student progress and to address concerns and answer questions. They are also expected to assess the students' final projects which they submit at the end of their virtual exchange.

The model differs from many other virtual exchange initiatives in that X-Culture collects the online interactions of the students and makes this available to colleagues who wish to carry out research on the data. A significant body of research is now beginning to emerge from the platform which looks at issues such as study GVTs, international collaboration, and experiential learning (<http://x-culture>).

[org/publications-etc/](#)). Teachers are encouraged to get involved as research collaborators and co-authors of these publications, thereby creating a rich community of both research and practice.

The project website provides some interesting insights into how the [X-Culture](#) model is continuing to grow and diverge. For example, various symposia have been held at conferences and on the premises of corporate partners. These symposia are attended by both teachers and students and give participants an opportunity to meet face-to-face with their virtual team partners.

3.3. Shared syllabus approaches to virtual exchange: COIL

Although it has been less well documented and researched, educators in other subject areas apart from foreign language education and business studies have also been engaging their students in virtual exchange initiatives since the beginnings of the internet. Their motivation has been to give students in different universities the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills, including intercultural competence and critical thinking, while working on shared subject content and also providing them with different cultural perspectives on their particular subject area ([Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008](#)).

There are a growing number of examples of practitioners from different subject areas who are introducing virtual exchange into their classrooms. [Vallance, Martin, and Naamani \(2015\)](#), for example, report on a project which engaged Japanese undergraduate students and UK high school pupils in online collaboration to design and programme robots in both the real world and in virtual world simulations.

However, in the area of the shared syllabus approaches to virtual exchange, there is one particular approach which has become dominant, and that is the [COIL Institute for Globally Networked Learning in the Humanities](#). Although this approach has existed for many years, as we have seen, the COIL model as it is known today has been developed since 2004 by Jon Rubin and his colleagues at the State University of New York (SUNY) network of universities ([Rubin, 2016](#)). Basically, the COIL approach to virtual exchange involves connecting two or more classes of similar course content in different countries. Once connected, the instructors in the partner universities design course modules in a way that the two different student populations will engage in communication and collaboration together. Often, the two groups of students have to work together to discuss course materials, solve a problem of practice, or produce another type of grade-able product. Collaboration may occur synchronously (in real time) or asynchronous (not in real time) and students may connect via email, voice, video, or in some combination (<https://nafsatechmig.com/resources/coil/>). The key difference between COIL exchanges and those that come from the foreign language or business

studies traditions of virtual exchange is undoubtedly the emphasis which is put on examining different cultural and national experiences or interpretations of subject content. While foreign language telecollaboration, for example, usually takes language and culture as the content and focus of an exchange, [COIL](#) adds a collaborative and comparative perspective to the subject content by creating a 'shared syllabus' which is worked on by all participating classes.

Of course, as is the case with subject specific virtual exchange, there is no one definitive [COIL](#) methodology. For example, in their volume which reports various [COIL](#) projects, [Schultheis Moore and Simon \(2015\)](#) present examples of courses which are completely online and others which are blended in nature. They also include courses which have negotiated a complete common syllabus and assignments, but they also report on projects which only come together to work on one particular assignment. In recent years, [COIL](#) has become one of the largest virtual exchange networks. There are currently 34 university members in the SUNY Global Partner Network and these are engaged with other institutions in collaborative projects. Rubin reports that from 2006 to 2016, [COIL](#) also worked more occasionally with an additional 30-40 universities and that they are presently supporting at least 65 joint [COIL](#) courses, serving well over 2,500 students (personal interview, 2016).

Although there is relatively little reported research on the learning outcomes of the [COIL](#) model, various reports of how the model works and examples of good practice are available. [Rubin \(2016\)](#) provides a broad introduction to the volume and its impact to date, while the volume by [Schultheis Moore and Simon \(2015\)](#) provides a fascinating overview of examples of online exchange initiatives in the Humanities which have stemmed from the work of the [COIL](#) Centre. Contributions to this volume provide examples of how the shared curriculum model can be integrated effectively into the study of subject areas as diverse as jazz music, feminism, the diaspora, gender roles, and human rights.

3.4. 'Service-provider' approaches to virtual exchange – iEARN, Soliya, and Sharing Perspectives

Until now we have looked at virtual exchange initiatives which have emerged from the work of individual teachers. However, there is an important field of work being carried out by organisations which are dedicated to providing the curricula and online environments (and even, in some cases, the educators) which universities may need to engage their students in virtual exchange.

This 'service-provider' approach to virtual exchange is actually quite common at all levels of education and various groups and organisations have been providing ready-made virtual exchange environments for primary and secondary education for many years. The oldest of these organisations is [iEARN](#), a non-profit organisation which was founded in 1988 and is currently made

up of over 30,000 schools and youth organisations in more than 140 countries. [iEARN](#) reports that over 2,000,000 students each day take part in their projects worldwide. The organisation offers over 150 pre-designed projects and provides online environments where educational institutions can sign on, choose the project which best suits their students' curriculum, and then participate with international partner classes to complete the activities.

Although [iEARN](#) cater principally for students in pre-university education, there are various other virtual exchange organisations which attend exclusively to higher education institutions. In contrast to the practitioner-driven approaches which generally rely on the teachers of the classes to organise and lead the exchange, these providers use 'facilitator-led' models which involve trained intercultural educators leading the online discussions and facilitating the intercultural learning. One of the best-known of these models is the [Soliya Connect](#) programme, which brings students from the west into dialogue with students from the Muslim world with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of the perspectives of others around the world on important socio-political issues and also to develop critical thinking, intercultural communication, and media literacy skills ([Helm, 2015](#)).

Each iteration of the project connects more than 200 students from more than 30 different universities in the US, Europe, and the predominantly Arab and/or Muslim worlds. Students are placed into small groups and guided through an eight-week, English language dialogue programme by pairs of trained facilitators. Students receive credit from their local institution for participating in the project, even though the facilitators and the online exchange environment are contracted from the [Soliya](#) organisation by the different universities.

Since being established in 2003, [Soliya](#) has worked with well over a 100 institutions, and have over 10,000 activated alumni from 28 countries. They have also trained over 1,300 young people to work as professional online facilitators since 2003. Although the initiative started as an attempt to promote West/Arab dialogue in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks in the US, [Soliya](#) has gone on to broaden its curriculum in order to attend to other areas, such as 21st century skills (e.g. cross-cultural communication, collaborative problem solving, team work, etc.) that enable participants to engage with differences more positively and to become active global citizens.

[Soliya's](#) virtual exchange programme contains various characteristics which make it differ to 'traditional' class-to-class virtual exchange set ups which we have seen until now. Firstly, communication takes place through synchronous video conferencing on a specially-designed platform. Students take part in a two-hour videoconference every week for eight weeks and this makes up the core of the programme. Students are allocated into small groups of eight to ten for interaction,

if possible with an equal division between participants from the west and the predominantly Arab and Muslim world so that they can be exposed to a multiplicity of diverse viewpoints. However, the most distinctive of the [Soliya](#)'s characteristics is undoubtedly the role of the facilitator who takes part in all the online sessions and whose role it is to create a safe dialogic space for learning and to ensure that the dialogue process is constructive and meaningful.

[Soliya](#) also follows a structured eight-week programme which ensures that, as relationships develop, participants are able to explore difficult conversations and gain critical awareness on their peers and themselves in the process. The [Soliya](#) curriculum also has clear education goals and a specific structure to help groups reach their learning objectives and to ensure that certain learning components on cross-cultural communication are a part of everyone's dialogue process. However, the format of the curriculum is semi-structured, thereby providing space for each group to discuss issues that are important to those young people in question.

Finally, the online interface that is used by [Soliya](#) in its virtual exchange programmes has been especially designed to facilitate online synchronous group interaction. This ensures that the technology facilitates diverse dialogue and supports inclusive discussions where everyone is able to be heard.

Another example of a virtual exchange 'service provider' has been pioneered by the [Sharing Perspectives Foundation](#), which is a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing students and academics with opportunities to collaboratively study contemporary themes related to the subjects of political science, law, economics, and social science. Although the [Sharing Perspectives](#) model has evolved greatly in recent times, their approach usually contains the following elements:

- *Providing academic content:* participating universities construct a shared curriculum which is presented through video lectures by the participating educators.
- *Online discussion:* after watching the video lecture assigned for that particular week, students come together in subgroups – of one student per participating university – in a web-based video conferencing room. Here, they discuss the lecture of that week. These discussions are hosted by professionally trained facilitators.
- *Engaging in collaborative research:* students are then required to collaboratively design, conduct, and share survey research about the topic in their own communities to learn about the broader societal impact of the topic ([Sharing Perspectives](#)).

An example of a [Sharing Perspectives](#) project is *Perspectives on the Euro(pean) Crisis*, which involved eight partner universities with funding from the European Commission. The project explored the

causes of and possible solutions to the European crisis and was structured around the major economic, political, and sociocultural challenges that were at stake in the European Union. The exchange lasted 16 weeks and included two video lectures a week, mostly contributed by the partner universities; a two-hour weekly dialogue session with eight to ten students from each university in the group which was led by trained facilitators; and a research component, with participants carrying out three surveys and gathering responses from peers and young people in their countries. Selected participants from each university were then invited to Brussels to present the research results. Students who successfully complete [Sharing Perspectives](#) projects are usually awarded 5 [European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System](#) (ECTS) for their work by their local institutions.

4. Recent developments in virtual exchange

Undoubtedly one of the main barriers to the development of virtual exchange has been the general lack of awareness of the educational value of the activity by educational decision makers and funding organisations. However, recent years have seen various developments which would suggest that the activity is growing in importance.

In 2011, various virtual exchange organisations including the [Global Nomads Group](#), [iEARN-USA](#), and [Soliya](#) came together with other organisations to form the [Virtual Exchange Coalition](#) in order to promote the activity as a distinctive area of learning and as an essential tool in 21st century education. Since its formation, the Coalition has actively lobbied on behalf of virtual exchange across the globe and it has seen various milestones, including when the Education and Scientific Research Office of the League of Arab States endorsed virtual exchange programming in a communiqué to all Arab Ministers of Education in 2011 and when the [Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau of the US State Department](#) (the world's largest funder of physical exchange) established a Virtual Exchange Unit in 2013. Finally, in the Asian context, the [Asia Pacific Virtual Exchange Association](#) (APVEA) has been established to promote virtual exchange initiatives in that region.

In the European context, the [European Commission](#) has provided funding for various research initiatives related to telecollaboration and virtual exchange. For example, between 2011 and 2014, the [Integrating Telecollaborative Networks in Higher Education](#) (INTENT) project was financed by the [European Commission](#) to achieve greater awareness of telecollaboration around the academic world and to look for ways for its integration into university education. One of the main outcomes of this project was the [UNICollaboration](#) platform where university educators and mobility coordinators can establish partnerships and find the resources necessary to set up telecollaborative exchanges. Since then, [UNICollaboration](#) has established itself as an academic organisation and holds regular

[bi-annual UNICollaboration conferences](#) for practitioners from all disciplines who are interested in virtual exchange.

The European Commission has financed several other virtual exchange projects, including [EVALuating and Upscaling telecollaborative Teacher Education](#) (EVALUATE) which is a European policy experiment that will study the impact of virtual exchange on students in initial teacher education across Europe as well as [Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange](#) (EVOLVE), which aims to promote virtual exchange across higher education.

More recently, the [European Commission](#) also published a large scale feasibility study on the potential of virtual exchange and, following this, launched [Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange](#) (EVE), a flagship programme which aims to expand the reach and scope of the Erasmus+ programme via virtual exchange. During 2018, EVE aims at engaging over 8000 participants from Europe and the South-Mediterranean in an engaging and safe online community where young people can participate in facilitated discussions, increase their intercultural awareness, and extend their linguistic (currently English, and soon French and Arabic) and communicative competences. The programme offers learners a wide range of virtual exchange initiatives and is currently implemented by a consortium of organisations led by [Search for Common Ground](#) and which includes [UNICollaboration](#).

5. Conclusion and future perspectives

The review of different virtual exchange initiatives and models which has been presented here provides an insight into the great variety and richness of work which is currently going on in the field. Of course, on a general level, all the initiatives can be seen to share a basic educational approach which involves a commitment to experiential learning, collaborative critical enquiry, and cross-curricular learning ([Cummins & Sayers, 1995](#)); and all would also share common educational goals such as the development of transversal skills, digital literacies, intercultural awareness, and the ability to live and work together with people from other cultural backgrounds ([Guth & Helm, 2010](#)). Many of the initiatives also appear to have encountered the same problems and challenges as they seek to expand their practice to greater numbers of classrooms and institutions. These include students having limited access to technology, teachers' limited digital competences, time-differences hindering synchronous communication, and institutional resistance to the inter-institutional approach to learning which virtual exchange can involve ([O'Dowd, 2013](#); [Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008](#), p. 223).

Differences between the models emerge at the level of organisational structure behind the initiatives. There is a clear difference, for example, between practitioner-led approaches such as the foreign language telecollaboration models outlined above, shared syllabus approaches such as [COIL](#), and the service-provider initiatives such as [Soliya](#) and [Sharing Perspectives](#). Inevitably, each approach can be seen to have its strong and weak points. Practitioner-led initiatives are developed by teachers who believe passionately in the underlying principles and aims of virtual exchange and therefore these models are likely to grow in a slow, but steady bottom-up fashion. On the other hand, approaches such as [COIL](#), which involve both management and teaching faculties, will benefit from the institutional support supplied by university management and are likely to receive the funding and training necessary to integrate virtual exchange on a large scale across an institution. However, the belief and support of senior management alone cannot guarantee the passionate belief and motivation of the teaching staff to this approach to learning. Finally, service provider approaches offer a valuable service to educational institutions, providing their students with well-designed frameworks of trained facilitators, partnerships, and tasks which they can access without needing staff from the institutions themselves to be knowledgeable in this area. In this sense, they provide an excellent supplementary educational resource which can complement students' regular studies without actually needing to be integrated into course syllabi. However, these initiatives are likely to have serious issues of sustainability as they continue to grow in popularity.

Inevitably, it is likely that virtual exchange will continue to grow in different directions, depending on practitioner-driven, institutionally-led and outsourced initiatives. The important issue is that the practitioners and promoters of these different forms of virtual exchange work closer together to promote the overall goal of increasing the number of students who benefit from online intercultural exchange as part of their university education.

The future of virtual exchange appears to be bright yet still unclear in many respects. Issues such as students' access to technology and teachers' lack of digital competences remain serious problems in many parts of the globe. Furthermore, while it is clearly beginning to gain recognition at national and transnational policy-making levels, there is still a need for greater communication and coordination among the many initiatives and organisations, and this undoubtedly hinders the further dissemination of this educational approach among the wider academic community. Agreeing to use one term, such as *Virtual Exchange*, may be a first step in the right direction, but even this proposal is likely to be rejected by some of the practitioners and organisations mentioned in this article. Further steps may include organising joint conferences and research initiatives with representatives of all the initiatives and organisations mentioned here. The [bi-annual UNICollaboration conference](#) is one example of such an initiative. It is also hoped that this journal will also contribute to bringing virtual exchange researchers and practitioners from a wide range of subject areas together. In any case,

although progress may be slow, it is clear that, in a world increasingly characterised by the rise of right-wing extremism, religious fanaticism, and populist political movements, virtual exchange will have an important role to play as educators strive to develop active, informed, and responsible citizens who are tolerant of difference and who are actively engaged in political and democratic processes.

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Intercultural encounters as hospitality. An interview with Richard Kearney

Breffni O'Rourke¹

Originally from Cork, Ireland, Richard Kearney is Charles B. Seelig Professor in Philosophy at Boston College. Among his many books, three titles in particular are representative of the themes discussed in this interview: *Hosting the stranger* (Continuum, 2011, co-edited with James Taylor); *On stories* (Routledge, 2002); and *Strangers, gods, and monsters: interpreting otherness* (Routledge, 2003). What will be of most immediate interest to readers of the *Journal of Virtual Exchange* is the [Guestbook Project](#), which Kearney founded in 2009. Guestbook is an online experiment in conflict resolution through sharing stories across borders.

The interview took place on the 10th of March 2018 in Dublin, where Professor Kearney was speaking at a conference and launching his new book with Sheila Gallagher, *Twinsome Minds: An act of double remembrance* (Cork University Press, 2017). This is an edited transcript of the conversation.

Keywords: intercultural communication; conflict resolution; personal stories; hospitality; continental philosophy.

BOR² What is the Guestbook Project? What does it do?

RK³ The Guestbook Project is an attempt to bring young people together, in divided communities – politically divided, socially divided, religiously divided, culturally divided – and to invite and

1. Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; orourkeb@tcd.ie

Breffni O'Rourke (Trinity College Dublin) is Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics and Manager of Language Learning Technologies and Resources, and is a member of UNICollaboration's Executive Board. His research focusses on online communication by language learners. He teaches Pedagogical Grammar of English, Discourse Analysis, Technology, Language, and Communication, and First Language Acquisition.

2. Breffni O'Rourke, interviewer

3. Richard Kearney, interviewee

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encourage them to tell their own story, listen to that of their adversary on the opposite side, and then to come together and construct a third story.



[Photo credit: Anne Bernard Kearney]

This is usually done audio-visually and is recorded on video – very often now on iPhone – and submitted to our website, which is a kind of classroom without walls for hospitality and peace. Then we select and post these submissions under three categories: *Documentary*, which can involve a group of young people from different sides; a section called *Exchanging Stories – Changing History*, which is a one-to-one from the two different sides. We’ve had Palestinian and Israeli, we’ve had Croat and Serb, we’ve had Catholic and Protestant from Derry, we’ve had Black and White from South Africa, and so on. Then the third is *Storybites*, where an individual simply talks into an iPhone for one to two minutes, recording a story of transformation when they encountered a stranger. Sometimes that stranger is included in camera, but not necessarily.

That actually has proved to be the most accessible and probably most democratic of all the approaches in that it doesn’t involve setting up cameras, it doesn’t involve lighting problems or sound problems. We do a little bit of editing sometimes when the videos are submitted.

And then, once a year our aim is to host an international festival. We’re doing Zagreb this summer, then Boston, and then hopefully Cape Town where we have a partnership with the [Institute for Justice and Reconciliation](#), which is the offshoot of the Truth and Reconciliation

Tribunal in South Africa; we're working quite closely with them and with other partnerships throughout the world. We run Guestbook on a very small budget; it's mainly voluntary, and it's non-profit.

BOR How do you reach the people who contribute their stories and their videos?

RK It's mainly been by contagion: the website's up there, it's on [YouTube](#), and word carries, image carries; and then through the partnerships, especially the Center for Digital Storytelling [now called [StoryCenter](#)], [Global Unites](#), [Narrative 4](#), and so on. The more word gets out, the more submissions start coming in.

BOR What's your hope for it? That this will be inspirational to the viewers, or that it will encourage reflection in the contributors, or something else?

RK I would say both. Let me give a few examples. One of the earliest ones we did was in Northern Ireland. We partnered with the [Nerve Centre](#) in Derry who invited two young girls from a Protestant and a Catholic school in Derry. They made a video together where they told their respective stories using archive materials and visuals and then got together and exchanged uniforms and went into each other's schools.

Very simple, their own idea, which we then posted on the website. It went viral, in its own little British-Irish way anyway: I think there were something like fifty thousand hits in the first week, and then it was picked up by the British and Irish papers – the *Guardian* ran a big piece on it – and they ended up as sort of peace ambassadors going to other schools, creating a mobile and virtual 'classroom without walls' as we like to call it.

This also happened in the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. An Armenian and a Turk got together, two students. The Turk had never met an Armenian, the Armenian had never met a Turk. They just sat down at a table and talked about their respective stories, in terms of how they first came to hear of the Armenian Genocide, and the extraordinary thing was that the Armenian student said that the word 'Turk' was the worst word in the Armenian language, though her parents and grandparents had never spoken about the genocide. When they left Armenia they had never spoken about it – it was just too traumatic. Likewise, the worst word for the Turkish student growing up in Istanbul was 'Armenian', but he didn't know why. It was because he'd never heard of the genocide either; it was suppressed for other reasons in Turkey. Recognising that the worst four-letter word in their respective languages was naming someone because of an event that had never been spoken

about transgenerationally: that was a moment of real breakthrough – a strange inter-linguistic epiphany – and together they went on to form a student youth movement for the commemoration of the genocide. So you know, a little moment can become something bigger, and that's how it works.

BOR And Guestbook provides that opportunity.

RK That's right. Our next phase is to build a platform with a sufficient number of *Storybites*, *Exchanging Stories* and *Documentaries*, the three brands, and to offer a very simple downloadable 'Peace Pedagogy' package, where peace groups and schoolrooms – primary, secondary, tertiary – can access it, and adapt it in their own particular way to their own particular circumstances.

BOR Drawing on the materials that have been contributed as various *Storybites*, etc.?

RK They would be seen as samples, yes. In a classroom situation some might make a documentary, others an *Exchanging Stories* piece, others a *Storybite*, and if they choose to submit it to us, then at the end of the year at our international festival we would invite some of them to show their work. That's a way of actually bringing them together physically as well as, obviously, virtually, online.

BOR What's particularly interesting about this is, first of all, the name: 'Guestbook'. In virtual exchange, when we bring groups together from different countries or communities, we think of them as meeting in something like a 'third place', kind of a neutral space; or that there's a kind of conduit of communication between them. This virtual space where they're meeting, whether it's through video conferencing or through online forums, is neither *there* nor *here*, it's a shared space; but you talk in terms of 'guests' and 'hosts' and 'hospitality', and that's a recurring theme in your work. At first glance that seems asymmetrical – you're the host and I'm the guest – so can you tell me how that feeds into the model, or how it inspires it, and why? What's the power of that metaphor of hospitality?

RK Well, what first struck me about the term 'hospitality' was that it has the same root as 'hostility', and that the word for 'enemy' and 'friend', 'host' and 'guest', in most Indo-European languages, is actually the same: *xenos* in Greek; *hostis*, *hospes* in Latin; both of those derivations of the root can mean either 'enemy' or 'friend', either 'host' or 'guest'. We even have, say in French, *table d'hôte* and *être hôte*; it means guest and it means host. So there's a common root to *hospitality* and *hostility*. Jacques Derrida coined the term *hostipitality*, because it can go either way...

BOR ...because you've got this duality...

RK Exactly. The exchange of stories may create a certain liberty of space to remake history, reinvent history, and open up new possibilities of history that have never been fulfilled in the past. Our inheritance is a set of promissory notes: not just what has happened, but what also has *not* happened, or *not yet* happened – but which could still exist. So it's about exploring that opening-up of new possibilities through this exchange of histories into stories, of hosts into guests, and vice versa. It takes away the power premise of "I'm the host with power, and you're the guest at my mercy".

BOR Because it is in fact reciprocal.

RK Yes, reciprocal and reversible. As is, in a fragile and contingent sense, the process of hospitality and hostility. Hospitality, like love, or peace, is a devalued word – we have the "hospitality industry" – but behind that word that has in some senses lost its original meaning, there's this very powerful metaphor of the reversibility and transversability of host and guest.

BOR There is also a kind of ethical value attached to the notion of hospitality, which isn't there in the simple notion of communication. There are duties attaching to the host and to the guest.

RK That's right; and it's a loaded word, it's a charged word. It's a beautiful word, and it's got a history in all of the Indo-European languages. But it's so relevant for what's happening in terms of emigration in our own times. In the United States of course it's huge: the Mexican border, the whole question of who is and who is not an American. But, over here, also who is and who is not an Irish citizen, a British citizen, a European citizen, the whole question of sharing of sovereignties, and obviously the massive immigration issues, issuing from Iraq and Syria and so on. So it's very, very relevant from the point of view of the whole refugee problem.

BOR The other thing is stories, of course. The major content of the Guestbook Project, and I guess the major output, are these stories. To contrast it a little with virtual exchange: virtual exchange is very open, and there's no reason why personal stories mightn't enter into it, but in my experience it very often operates on a more generalising or abstract level. If an exchange has an explicit intercultural focus, then when the students are telling personal stories, the point isn't primarily the personal story; it's what that tells us about the culture. But what for you is the power of the individual story? And I emphasise *story* rather than *experience*, because once you tell a story you're structuring it, it's not just a recounting of fact.

RK Well going back to Aristotle, since I'm a philosopher for my living, he made an important distinction in his *Poetics* between *history* and *story*. *History* is chronicle – telling something as it happened, one thing after another. He uses the phrase *meta* – one thing *after* another. Whereas *story* – *mythos-mimesis* – means redescribing what happened through a *mythos*, a plot, putting a figure onto what is otherwise a mere sequence of events, a serial flow of moments one after the other. The poetic plot can turn time around, begin in the middle, *in medias res*, as most epic stories did, and then go back or go forward and so on. So it's a freedom of imagination *over* events, transforming one after (*meta*) another into one thing *because of* (*dia*) another. In that way, story is free to brush time against the grain, to reconfigure history into a meaningful form or pattern – turning accidents into essences, particulars into universals (to use Aristotle's own terms).

Coming back to your question of culture, we may say accordingly that every national culture is an imagined community. That doesn't mean it's unreal. In fact, Aristotle would say it's even more real, it's even more true, because the truth of something is accessed more through story than history. History is an accumulation of facts – we need that forensic, empirical evidence – but story is what gives essential meaning (*eidos*) to the data. It is what makes the given into a gift, so to speak. That is what Paul Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative*, calls the 'threefold mimesis of time': the prefiguring, configuring, and refiguring of our otherwise random experience. If we do it in art, we can do it in life too. Moving from action to text back to action. Life-narrative-life. The triadic dialectic of narrative imagination.

BOR Stories are also where meaning becomes contestable.

RK Exactly, and that's democracy. The exchange of stories as a healthy and necessary contestation. It becomes a drama. A creative 'conflict of interpretations' (Ricoeur), that aims towards great consensus without ever presuming to unite or totalise the different narrative perspectives into one. The detour through narrative imagination reminds us that we have the freedom to reimagine ourselves. We find ourselves within a plot called history – we are born into an inheritance of facts and figures – but we can redescribe that plot, while always having due regard, needless to say, for the past as what actually happened. But telling it as it actually happened, history, needs to be supplemented and complemented by story, which is telling it *as if* it happened like this or that; as it could have happened, should have happened, might have happened. Story can thus retrieve and reignite some of the unfulfilled or unexplored 'possibilities' of the past. Storytelling shows us that that beside actual history lies possible history, and it is possibility that gives a future to the past.

BOR In the case of the Guestbook contributions, the *Storybites* and the other formats offer us personal stories. I saw a very nice one about a Rwandan-Congolese couple for example. They talk about how they met, and the relationships with the families. That is very much a personal story: they're not telling the story of Rwanda or of the Congo or of their people...

RK No – but personal stories like this are symptomatic of those cultural stories, collective stories, which they're embedded in. The forbidden nature of their liaison is only because Rwandans have this hostile view towards the Congolese and vice versa. Or ditto for nationalists and unionists in Derry or divided people in countless other places. The culture is carried in the bones. But, you know, by telling their personal stories, the transgenerational traumas and silences and prejudices and wounds that they carry within them are brought to bear in a much more personal and dramatic way – they are brought into the open, translated into words and images that can be 'worked through' (as Freud and the trauma therapists would say). In being narrated and exchanged, incurable wounds become healable scars. They are illumined and felt. Without concrete incarnate stories, you're left with ideological abstractions, the grand narratives of Official History. We need micro-stories to counterbalance macro-histories.

BOR So it's left to the viewer to think through questions like "What does this all mean for my situation? For me as a nationalist or unionist in Derry? For me as a Croat or Serb in the Balkans?" – or whatever else your national allegiance might be.

RK And it should be translatable and transferrable in that way. That's why I talk about communication in that sense as contagion – in the positive sense of contagious transmission; an example or model that can be taken from Northern Ireland and applied to South Africa or vice versa. These communities, these dialogues taking place in very specific cultures, and personal stories, when they're shared on the internet, can actually create a space and time for saying "We're not the only ones who are screwed by history; this has happened over there and look what they've been able to do" in however basic or small a way. These possible transmissions are working on the micro-narrative level.

In fact, the book we launched here in Dublin last night, *Twinsome minds: an act of double remembrance*, was a multimedia attempt to tell the micro-narratives of 1916, both in the Battle of the Somme, the Irish who died there – five thousand in a single day – and then the five hundred who died in the streets of Dublin in Easter week of 1916⁴. The multimedia

4. A reference to the Easter Rising against British rule in Ireland.

performance, upon which the book is based, attempts to tell the war stories of siblings – from the same homes, families, same parishes, communities – who found themselves on opposite sides: untold or repressed stories that didn't fit in to the official histories of binary opposition, British versus Irish.

By working with the micro-stories, the macro can actually be revisited in new ways. The story opens up history and shows it not to be a mausoleum of dead congealed facts but a laboratory of meanings that can constantly be revisited and reimagined. Because the past is never past. It's always being re-lived, again and again. The child is father of the man. We carry not only our own personal past with us, as Freud realised, but also our collective history, conscious and unconscious.

Our unconscious wounds and desires are often strangers within us. It's important to realise that, deep down, we're strangers to ourselves – as well as to each other. There's a philosophical and an ethical premise to the Guestbook Project: that strangers are not just those out there, refugees and immigrants arriving at borders – but also alienated and unacknowledged parts of our own selves. The strangers within us return to us as uncanny doubles and ghosts – as Heidegger⁵ and Kristeva⁶ remind us in their analysis of *die Unheimlichkeit* [the uncanny]⁷ – and if we can understand how so many of our fears and scapegoats result from our own unconscious projections, we're more likely to be more tolerant and open to the strangers in others. Otherwise the tendency is to say “Well, I know exactly who I am, who we are; we're not strangers to ourselves, we're all united in a single, indivisible, sovereign nation or community; the others are the strangers, out there”. That creates a binary that the Guestbook is trying to challenge and transcend.

Take the example of the guest and the host in translation. Hospitality is a process of translation where the host language receives the guest language. If you're translating text from Greek into English, for example, something happens to English and to Greek. There's a mutual revision and re-invention of the resources of both languages. But we'll only be really open to this reciprocal linguistic 'othering' if we acknowledge the stranger and the strangeness within ourselves, and within our own mother tongue. The mother tongue is never totally our own, there's always something of the Other, the Trojan Horse within the citadel of the same. The alien within the origin. The multiple within the one. There is no

5. Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Translated by J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson. Blackwell.

6. Kristeva, J. (1991). *Strangers to ourselves*. Translated by L. S. Roudiez. Columbia University Press.

7. Freud, S. (2003). *The uncanny*. Translated by D. McLintock & H. Houghton. Penguin.

pure dialect of the tribe. We all speak after Babel. There's always some gap between you and your words, somewhere.

BOR Something like that idea of strangeness, and becoming strange to yourself, lies behind one popular model of virtual exchange, called [Cultura](#), designed by Gilberte Furstenberg at MIT. The sequence of activities is based on comparing cultures, for example through word associations: what do you associate with *police*, what do you associate with *religion*. Each group looks at the associations that the other side – an American group, for example – had with *police*, but then they also reflect on what associations they as, say, Spanish people have with *police*, and ask themselves where that comes from. Because the enemy of openness in a way is not recognising that you're not the centre of the universe, and that you are as strange to others as they are to you.

You've brought up in a couple of places the idea of risk. Virtual exchange is risky in all sorts of mundane ways. Anybody who does it will tell you the technology isn't always reliable, it can be organisationally risky, it can be pedagogically risky: projects may not have the outcomes that you hoped for. It's also risky socially and interpersonally, for these people who talk about themselves and their cultures. Even where it isn't a conflict situation like the ones you work with, there's always a risk of loss of face, even in fairly mundane ways. Can you say something about that idea of risk in meeting the Other? The risk that's involved in hospitality?

RK Well, even in our ordinary language we say "I'll risk an interpretation, I'll risk a phrase". Even to speak to another person is to risk translating your intentions into a language that can be understood or misunderstood, and as soon as it's out there it's subject to multiple interpretations. There's always a risk in exposing yourself, in betraying your feelings by putting them into words – yes, you literally *betray* yourself. As Lady Macbeth says to Macbeth, "Your face, my Thane, is as a book where men / May read strange matters"⁸ – and that's even before Macbeth puts his thoughts into words. There's always risk of betraying yourself by communicating.

But the first act of civilisation was a handshake, which was already an act of hospitality by putting out an open hand rather than reaching for the sword. Abraham and Sarah did it with the three strangers at Mamre⁹, and the basic story is that in welcoming the *hostis*, and in risking your home, by inviting these three strangers out of the desert to enter your

8. Act 1, Scene 5

9. Genesis 18:2

home as foreigners, as strangers, to share your food, you could lose everything; or you could bring about a new civilisation: the Abrahamic ethic of hospitality to 'widows, orphans, and strangers', and, for the Abrahamic religions, to the divine. Insofar as there is a god in Judaism that can be named or seen, it is the stranger, and Christianity also starts with the arrival of a stranger, and a young Nazarene woman who says "yes" to that annunciation.

You know, this goes right down through Western and other civilisations; it's that wager of hospitality, that the enemy, or the seeming enemy, the stranger, may be befriended, may turn from enmity to amity. That's always a risk and a wager, and I think hospitality loses its edge, its drama, its radical import and urgency if it loses that audacity.



[Photo credit: Anne Bernard Kearney]

Hospitality is never achieved once and for all, it can risk becoming hostility the next moment. In fact, even in the Abrahamic story in Genesis, two episodes later¹⁰ there's the appalling

10. Genesis 19:2

betrayal of hospitality when Lot, who is Abraham's brother-in-law, is surrounded by the citizens of Sodom, and he's faced with this terrible situation of having to sacrifice his guest-strangers to their violence. So it's not that hosting the stranger is something achieved forever. It is realised for a moment by Abraham and Sarah only for Lot to be faced with this terrible dilemma. It's an on-going trial. *L'épreuve de l'étranger*, as Antoine Berman put it.

BOR So it's a situation that has to be constantly monitored and negotiated and can't be taken for granted.

RK Yes. Like the European Union [EU], which we're discussing at this moment. It was a moment of hospitality in the 1950's when Adenauer got together with Guy Mollet and then Jean Monnet, saying "We've had too much hostility, Europe has to pool sovereignties and work together". Now, with Brexit and the rise of a new nationalist populism in Italy and elsewhere, we have to renegotiate what trans-national and trans-regional hospitality means between peoples. If we just say it's a *fait accompli*, then the EU dies; of boredom, of bureaucracy, of smugness, but sometimes a realisation of danger and threat to the European vision reminds us of the inaugural risk and audacity of the project. It's a real summons to rethink what inter-cultural hospitality really means, in terms of living with twenty-seven other nations.

BOR Work with conflict and conflict resolution has been a strand of your career; you were involved in peace initiatives in Northern Ireland even long before the Good Friday Agreement¹¹, and now you're involved in Guestbook. Has your study in philosophy led you to this interest, or is it a coincidental convergence?

RK I think sometimes there is sort of felicitous chiming of my experience of hospitality in real life and my readings about the philosophy of hospitality with my mentors in Paris, where I did my doctoral degree: Paul Ricoeur, for whom the whole notion of linguistic hospitality was huge – what could be called a 'hermeneutics of translation' – saw Europe as an exchange of wounded memories healing through narrative exchange. That was very important for me, the ethic of narrative pooling and reversibility.

BOR And was that partly the personal experience of being in France, and of being in some sense a guest in France as an Irish person?

11. The wide-ranging centrepiece agreement of the Northern Ireland peace process, achieved in 1998 following many years of multilateral talks.

RK Well, it's interesting that you say that, although I haven't thought of that before; but it was true I was a 'guest of the nation' in France: free education for my entire doctoral degree, where I was lucky enough to work with Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida in the late 1970's – three masters of the philosophy of hospitality who have all written books on the subject. That obviously was an important influence.

I was asked by someone at one of our Guestbook seminars in 2009; "Why did you get interested in all this? Had it anything to do with your own personal experience?" I thought about it and I said, well, maybe it is related to the fact that I grew up in Ireland at a time when there was a war going on in the north of the island. I recounted one particular experience which I realised was quite fundamental to my thinking. It happened when I was moderating a conversation between two groups: IRA [Irish Republican Army] prisoners on the nationalist/Catholic/republican side and UDA [Ulster Defence Association] prisoners on the unionist side. One of the republicans told the story of how he had nearly been shot. He had been taken out of his bed, blindfolded, handcuffed, brought to a barn in the boot of a car, tied up, and was about to be shot. He asked his assassin, could he smoke a last cigarette? The assassin said yes; and as he was smoking the cigarette he told the story of how he himself had joined the IRA and why he had shot people. He described what had happened to his grandfather, being tortured by the B-Specials¹², and then how his father had been taken out and kneecapped; how his mother had had a breakdown and become an alcoholic and ended up on the street, and how his brother had been tortured... He went through a litany of appalling brutalities, and told how he had become so full of anger and hatred that he went out and shot his enemies. There was a silence after he'd finished the cigarette and he waited – five minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes – for the gun to go off, but no gun went off. When finally he untied himself and turned around – there was nobody there. The barn was empty. He walked home.

He finished telling that story, and another person stood up at the back of the room and said "I was the loyalist paramilitary who was about to shoot you, but when I heard your story, I realised it was also *my* story, and I couldn't shoot you". That did affect me – an exchange of narratives where one person discovered himself in the enemy, through this exchange of stories in pretty dramatic circumstances. The fact that the incident occurred in the northern part of my country and that so many people since have been working under very difficult circumstances towards some kind of peace agreement that eventually came about in 1998, gives some kind of hope. It seemed impossible that John Hume would ever shake hands with the devil, or that the Queen of England and Ian Paisley would ever talk to republican

12. A controversial police force in Northern Ireland, 1920-1969, drawn chiefly from the unionist/Protestant community

nationalists like Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams, but these gestures have occurred. They occurred with Mandela and De Klerk. Sadat and Begin. They can happen.

BOR And in every case with tremendous political risk.

RK Huge, and death, assassination; that's the risk too. There's another story that I like to tell, going back to old Anglo-Norman-Irish struggles¹³ where the Fitzgeralds and the Ormonds were at war with each other. At one point the Fitzgeralds surrounded the Ormonds in Dublin Cathedral and Gearóid Mór Fitzgerald said: "Cut a hole in the door and I will take off my armour and put my arm through. You can cut it off or you can shake my hand. If the first, the war continues; if the second, the war ends". They shook hands and the war ended. That's where the common colloquial phrase to "chance your arm" comes from. For me, such little stories (*petits récits*, as Lyotard called them, often occluded and ignored by official history), carry seeds of hope that the impossible can become possible. So that's the wager behind the Guestbook.

BOR I'm interested in online discourse of all sorts, and it seems to me that, at least in certain corners of the internet, people are very, very far from reaching that point of risking something and making themselves vulnerable and saying "let's shake hands" because there's a step before that, which is just to engage with somebody, in the sense of listening to them, genuinely hearing what they have to say, trying to find out whether you want to change their minds, or whether maybe you need to revisit your own views. Instead, a culture has grown up of discourse as a blood-sport. A whole vocabulary has grown up around put-downs – defeating somebody, conquering somebody in discourse: there are terms like *zingers*, *throwing shade*, *owning*, *burn*...

RK Are these phrases particular to online conversations?

BOR I'm sure you'll find them in oral conversations as well, but people behave differently online. The social psychology of online behaviour is very interesting, and not perhaps as simple as one might think...

RK Well, it's surely about defence mechanisms – the safety of the touch screen where, ironically, one cannot be touched. It is one way. One has a certain vicarious and voyeuristic invulnerability in certain war or sex gaming. Of course such online conversations can also offer fragile people

13. The hostilities, following the Anglo-Norman invasion of the late 12th century, between the invaders and the indigenous Gaelic chieftains.

a certain security where the normal defence reactions can be overcome and a certain safe space for free conversation opened up.

BOR If you read the comment sections in extreme right-wing media, for example, it's about insult, about conquest, about putting people in their place. If a liberal strays into a conservative website, to stay with that example, it's perceived as an assault or an encroachment, and they're told to "get out of here – we recognise you, you don't belong here". Even on the other side, a liberal who strays into a forum like that typically isn't there with any realistic intention to change minds. They're not playing the game of changing minds.

Linguists and applied linguists are familiar with Grice, the ordinary-language philosopher. One of his notions of communication is that the foundation of communication is cooperation: that there's an accepted purpose or direction of any given talk-exchange. In a lot of online discourse, it seems to me, especially in these polarised times, the accepted purpose or direction is conquest, victory, triumph, putting the interlocutor down. Do you see any prospect for ventures like the Guestbook or virtual exchange to change the mindset with which people approach that kind of discourse?

RK Well, it's the old phrase, "the hair of the dog that bit you". If there's a lot of toxic violence going on in this anonymous, faceless, incarnate discourse online, get in there and change it. Go to the source of it and use anonymity for the good.

It is an ethical dilemma. Go to hostility and convert it into hospitality. I think there is something about telling the good stories of people caught in a trap of repetition, compulsive repetition, where sometimes going into the virtual world liberates them from the noxious cycles and gives them a laboratory of imaginary possibilities to explore other options and then return to their life again.

I think the important thing is that, as Paul Ricoeur put it, you go from 1) action (your lived experience), to 2) text (let's say the virtual text, textuality, the Web), back to 3) action. Ricoeur calls it a hermeneutic narrative circle of prefiguration–configuration–refiguration. That passage through the otherness of the text, where, yes, we enter an alien, anonymous world where we are othered, where we are no longer ourselves and can assume personas (whether you're reading a novel or you're online), this can have real liberating potential. As long as you know you came from a real world and you return to the real world where you have responsibilities to real others. So you go from flesh to virtuality to flesh; incarnation to incarnation to re-incarnation. I think if you keep that circuit, that hermeneutic circle always

in mind, there's less likelihood of getting lost in the realm of the purely anonymous. So the virtual online world has, in such circumstances, the capacity for an important emancipatory function. Though it always carries the other side of the screen – the lure of dissimulation and manipulation: a masking function open to the perversions of power, bullying, and violence that you describe.

BOR You're based in the United States, and you started the Guestbook Project in a very different time, around the time Barack Obama was elected. Now there's a very different figure occupying the American presidency; nationalism seems to be on the rise in Europe, and authoritarianism. The US seems to be extremely polarised ideologically, between conservatives and liberals. Does that make you despondent or pessimistic in light of the kind of thing that you're trying to achieve?

RK Well, you know, hospitality does not exist without, alas, the constant shadow of hostility. It's all the more reason, when faced with Brexit and the rise of extreme neo-nationalism in countries like Hungary, Croatia, Poland and, of course, in Trump's America, to get down and work on this. I'm very encouraged by, for example, the recent reaction to the gun massacres in the Florida school¹⁴. Youths are speaking again; there's also [Black Lives Matter](#) on campuses and increasing crowd protests in US cities not seen since the civil rights marches. As Hölderlin said, where the danger grows, there also grows the promise of change¹⁵. It's a huge challenge, but I don't give up hope. We're in dark times, but there are still glimmers.

BOR Thank you very much for your time.

14. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, 14 February 2018.

15. Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch (Patmos, 1813).

The long and winding road...

Francesca Helm¹

Abstract

The long and winding road is a metaphor for a journey, often used to describe life journeys and the challenges encountered. The metaphor was used for the title of my keynote to refer both to the journey towards the current position of virtual exchange in education policy – but also the long road ahead. This paper aims to explore the emergence of virtual exchange in educational policy and how it has been adopted by non-profit organisations, educational institutions, and policy makers to address geo- and socio-political tensions. Though still a relatively new field, in recent years there have been some important developments in terms of policy statements and public investments in virtual exchange. The paper starts by looking at the current state-of-the-art in terms of virtual exchange in education policy and initiatives in Europe. Then, using an approach based on ‘episode studies’ from the policy literature, the paper explores the main virtual exchange schemes and initiatives that have drawn the attention of European policy makers. The paper closes by looking at some of the lessons we have learnt from research on the practice of virtual exchange, and how this can inform us as we face the long road ahead of us. The focus of this paper is on the European context not because I assume it to be the most important or influential, but rather because it is the one I know best, since it is the context in which I have been working.

Keywords: virtual exchange, telecollaboration, policy, intercultural learning.

“The past is linked to the present and plays an important role in imagining the future” (Rizvi, 2008, p. 32).

1. University of Padua, Padua, Italy; francesca.helm@unipd.it

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1. Recent developments in virtual exchange and policy experimentations

In recent years the pedagogic approach of virtual exchange and the field as a whole has drawn the attention of policy makers in various parts of the world. In Europe alone there are several policy experimentations funded by the European Commission in which virtual exchange is being piloted as an approach to education which has the potential of becoming mainstreamed (O'Dowd, 2018). The EVALuating and UpscAling Telecollaborative teacher Education (EVALUATE) project, which began in 2017, involves not only educators and researchers, but a network of Spanish universities and representatives from several education ministries². It explores the impact of telecollaborative exchange on future teachers' digital-pedagogical competencies, intercultural awareness, and foreign language skills. The pilot has involved 30 partnerships carrying out exchanges with almost 1000 future teachers, and ministry partners are collaborating with the team in order to disseminate the findings and introduce policy measures which will support the adoption of virtual exchange in pre-service teacher education (O'Dowd, 2018).

The Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange (EVOLVE) project was launched in January 2018 and aims to mainstream virtual exchange as an innovative form of collaborative international learning across disciplines in higher education institutions in Europe and beyond. It was funded as a Forward-Looking Cooperation Project³, that is, a project which aims “to identify, test, develop or assess innovative policy approaches that have the potential of becoming mainstreamed and giving input for improving education and training systems”⁴.

In January 2018, the European Commission launched the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project which aims to “**expand the reach and scope of the Erasmus+ programme via virtual exchanges**” by linking “**young people** (aged 18 to 30 years), youth workers, youth organisations, students and academics in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean using online learning activities and technology-enabled solutions in order to **strengthen ‘people to people contacts’ and intercultural dialogue**” (p. 10)⁵.

2. This Key Action 3 project (582934-EPP-1-2016-2-ES-EPPKA3-PI-POLICY) is led by Robert O'Dowd and involves several university partners but also the ministries of Portugal, Spain, and the regional Junta De Castilla Y León, the Ministry of Human Capacities, Hungary, and the Ministry of Science, Research and the Arts of Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

3. Funded under Erasmus+ Key Action 3: Support for policy reform, Priority 5 – Achieving the aims of the renewed EU strategy for higher education (EACEA 41/2016). Project is led by Sake Jager at the University of Groningen.

4. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/key-action-3-support-for-policy-reform/prospective-initiatives/forward-looking-cooperation-projects_en

5. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/tender-specifications_eve.pdf

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange⁶ is piloting several different models of virtual exchange that are promoted through a page on the [European Youth Portal](#), which was launched in March 2018. The models of exchange promoted can be split into two main categories: ready-made exchanges which involve multiple partners⁷, and small-scale, teacher-led, Transnational Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Projects (TEPs)⁸ and debates. Examples of the former are interactive Open Online Courses (iOOCs) that bring together content in the form of short video lectures and online facilitated dialogue. The latter, TEPs, are developed by educators and youth workers who, after following an online, experiential training course, design and implement their own exchange to meet their specific needs and target groups.

In June 2018, six months into the project, 3265 participants had already taken part in some of the project activities⁹. The reported impact is extremely positive with 94.5% of participants reporting they were glad to have taken part in the activity, 86% interested in further opportunities of engaging with Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities, and 94% of participants agreeing it had a positive impact on their ability to work in a culturally diverse workplace. Furthermore, over 130 educators and youth workers have taken part in training programmes which support them in the collaborative design and subsequent implementation of transnational virtual exchanges which meet the needs of their specific target groups and activities, and 265 have trained to become facilitators.

The pilot project has been deemed successful enough to continue in 2019. In European Commission documents regarding Erasmus funding for 2021-2027, virtual exchange is mentioned several times as a tool for making the next Erasmus 2021-2027 programme, Erasmus For All, more inclusive: “Better outreach to disadvantaged people through new formats such as virtual exchanges and shorter learning periods abroad” ([European Commission, 2018b](#), n.p.).

Yet virtual exchange is not a completely new pedagogical practice. As Steve [Thorne \(2018\)](#) said in his keynote at this same third UNICollaboration conference to those of us who have been engaged in this activity and research for years or even decades now, it is difficult to understand why this activity has taken so long to draw the attention of policy makers and educational institutions. The internationalisation expert Hans [De Wit \(2016\)](#) also remarked on this,

“[m]ore striking than the fact that there are already a substantive number of OIE (Online Intercultural Exchange) experiences in place is the fact that these cases are not

6. The project is being implemented by a consortium which includes Search for Common Ground, Soliya, Sharing Perspectives Foundation, UNIMED, Anna Lindh Foundation, and UNICollaboration.

7. Described in [O'Dowd \(2018\)](#) as ‘service-provider approaches’ to virtual exchange

8. Based on a collaboratively designed syllabus.

9. https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/impact-erasmus-virtual-exchange_en

identified and recognised as innovative forms of joint curriculum development and internationalisation” (p. 80).

So the question is, why is there **now** this interest in virtual exchange on a policy level, and what are the factors that may have led to this? Also what are the implications of this engagement for educators?

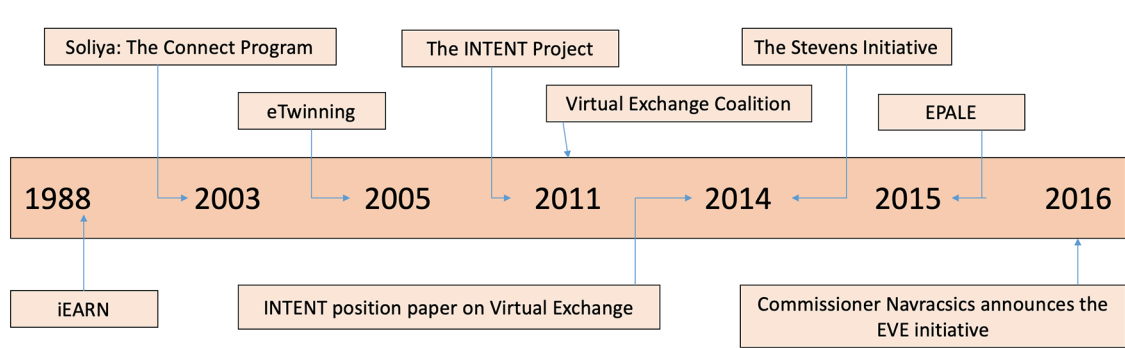
In seeking to answer these questions, I draw from the fields of policy studies and international relations. I first of all adopt an approach known as episode studies (Start & Hovland, 2004), which is used in policy literature, in order to explore the developments which may have led to this recent policy change in the European context. I then explore international education and virtual exchange as tools of soft power (Nye, 1990, 2004). I close by looking at the role of research in informing policies and practices and take into consideration some of the recommendations that have been made in the key notes at previous UNICollaboration conferences, and their implications for future developments in virtual exchange practice and policy.

2. Factors leading to policy change

In episode studies, a historical narrative leading up to the policy change in question is constructed. This involves creating a timeline of key policy decisions and practices along with important documents and events (Start & Hovland, 2004) which allows for the identification of motivating factors which may have prompted the policy change and the extent to which research may have contributed to this. Within the context of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, a timeline was indeed created as part of the Feasibility Study (PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017), and this is the starting point of my exploration of milestones in this long and winding road (Figure 1). This is not because the timeline is a complete and objective record of the history of virtual exchange, but rather because it is a representation of what was deemed of relevance for policy makers intending to fund a European pilot project in the field of virtual exchange. The need to understand intercultural exchange historically is also highlighted by Rizvi (2008) who writes that “in a world in which social networks of money, technologies, people and ideas increasingly shape life options and chances, thinking historically about global interconnectivity is indispensable. [...] The past is linked to the present and plays an important role in imagining the future” (p. 32).

The beginning of virtual exchange is marked as 1988 with reference to [iEARN](#), now a well known NGO which, according to the website, has spread to 140 countries, with a network of 30,000 projects in 30 languages and reaches 50,000 teachers and 2,000,000 young people.

Figure 1. A timeline of virtual exchanges (adapted from PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017, p. 26)



iEARN grew out of the New York/Moscow Schools Telecommunications Project (NYS-MSTP) which was launched in 1988 by Peter Copen¹⁰ and the Copen Family Fund. This project was seen to respond to a perceived need to connect youth from the two countries during a time which was marked by the tensions between the United States and the USSR that had developed during the Cold War. The pilot project, between 12 schools in each nation, was supported by the Sciences in Moscow Academy and the New York State Board of Education. Students worked in both English and Russian on projects based on their curricula, which had been designed by participating teachers. The project was based on the assumption that “the problems facing the world are created by people, either individually or collectively, and that these problems can be resolved through effective communication. Telecommunications can be the tool which brings people together in cooperative ventures to apply the attitudes and skills of effective listening and problem solving” (Magi Educational Services, 1992, p. 3).

The project was expanded in the early 1990s to include China, Israel, Australia, Spain, Canada, Argentina, and the Netherlands. iEARN then began to develop other projects, for example *Learning Circles* and the *Orillas project* (Cummins & Sayers, 1995) to build partnerships with educators across the globe. Cummins and Sayers (1995) have described the potential of these types of global learning networks as challenging top-down control over learning, which dominates many societies. In their eyes, electronic networks were key tools for world-wide problem solving as they offered opportunities to increase intercultural communications and cooperation and presented a powerful alternative to the directions that educational reform in the United States was taking at the time. In their view, these types of online intercultural collaborations derived their impact not from technology, but from “a

10. https://myhero.com/Peter_Copen_2010

vision of how education can enact, in microcosm, a radical restructuring of power relations both in domestic and global arenas” (Cummins & Sayers, 1995, p. 8).

The next milestone on the timeline is 2003 with [Soliya's Connect Program](#). In a different historical and geopolitical context, but with a similar vision to iEARN, the origins of this virtual exchange project lay in the perceived need to address the specific political and social tensions of the time and the polarisation of societies. Just two years after 9/11 and the beginning of George Bush's [War on Terror](#) – Soliya's Connect Program was designed to address the tensions between 'Western' and 'predominantly Arab and Muslim' societies, tensions which since then, many would argue, have been exacerbated. As [Himelfarb and Idriss \(2011\)](#) write:

“[t]he explicit focus is on connecting students from the West with those in the Arab and Muslim world and on maximizing impact along four learning metrics: empathy, cross-cultural communication skills, critical thinking, and activation (or pursuit of further cross-cultural engagement)” (p. 4).

Soliya's Connect Program is based on principles of intergroup contact and sustained interaction between members of what are seen as opposing groups. Research in the field of social psychology which relates to Gordon [Allport's \(1954\)](#) contact hypothesis – suggests that interactions between members of 'opposing' groups should be promoted to reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations ([Paolini, Harwood, Hewstone, & Neumann, 2018](#))¹¹. According to [Allport's \(1954\)](#) theory, certain conditions should be met for optimal contact, that is equal status, common goals, no intergroup competition, and sanction from authorities. A recent meta-analysis of relevant research has found these conditions to be facilitative but not necessary ([Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011](#)). The Connect Program is also informed by research on the impact of media on intergroup relations ([Argo, Idriss, & Fancy, 2009](#)), their polarising influence on cross-cultural relations, but also on the belief and evidence that media can have a constructive impact on how we perceive and address global issues. The project thus positions itself among initiatives that use media for social change, and aims to promote sustained contact in a safe space, and to activate young people to continue seeking opportunities for intergroup contact. Through the Connect Program, students from a wide range of partner universities are placed in small, diverse dialogue groups that meet over a period of eight weeks for two-hour sessions of online facilitated dialogue. The sessions are led by facilitators, often volunteer alumni of the Connect Program who have been trained in the implementation of this form of online dialogue. Since the project began, Soliya has established partnerships with educational

11. According to the theory certain conditions have to be met for this contact to lead to positive results, and these include equal status, cooperation, and sharing a common goal.

institutions across the globe and thousands of students have participated in the programme, which is integrated into institutional curricula (Elliot-Gower & Hill, 2015; Helm, 2018).

The two organisations, Soliya and iEARN, together with Global Nomads Group, were founding members of the [Virtual Exchange Coalition](#) which also appears on the timeline above, in 2011. Essentially, this is an advocacy coalition, an important type of actor in the field of public policy. This type of coalition contains “people from a variety of positions [] who share a particular belief system and who show a non-trivial degree of coordinated activity over time” (Cairney, 2013, n.p.). The goal of this coalition, as reported on their website, was to work “together to foster a more supportive and generative ecosystem for virtual exchange programming to develop, innovate and grow. Our goal is to make it possible for all young people to have a meaningful cross-cultural experience as part of their education”¹².

If we analyse the Virtual Exchange Coalition’s website from a linguistic and multimodal perspective we see that it speaks the language of policy makers, who do not have the time or interest in delving deep into academic research (Start & Hovland, 2004). The website offers a concise definition, “virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs”¹³ (para. 1), information about *evidence-based measures* of the impact of virtual exchange as well as *testimonials* of participants, which provide *proof of concept*. The website also provides information about major milestones in their work supporting this emerging field, which is supported visually by a timeline that includes milestones regarding United States policy and virtual exchange, for example endorsements, policy documents and reports, workshops, and statements about virtual exchange by key political figures such as Jim Kerry and then-president of the US, Barack Obama. The coalition’s work was reported in the journal *Foreign Policy* which highlighted the potential of virtual exchange for public diplomacy: “[t]he surging growth of the online world has shown that it can quickly transmit volatility and disruption, sparking offline violence. What the success of these virtual exchanges proves is that there is a reciprocal potential for peacebuilding that might be just as powerful” (Himelfarb, 2014, para. 14).

The advocacy work of the coalition was instrumental in the establishing of the [Stevens’ Initiative](#), a US-born virtual exchange initiative which is the next stop on the timeline. It was established in 2014 and has been providing funding for virtual exchange through *Calls for Participation*. The Stevens Initiative is managed by the Aspen Institute and involves the [U.S. Department of State](#), the Bezos

12. The Coalition, originally called the Exchange 2.0 Coalition, was formed by three large virtual exchange organisations based in the United States (Global Nomads Group, iEARN-USA, and Soliya) who with different models of virtual exchange address a wide range of demographics, from school children to university students. They present virtual exchange as bringing together new technologies, public diplomacy, and the benefits of exchange that study abroad programmes have traditionally fostered – albeit to a very small percentage of the United States population.

13. <http://virtualexchangecoalition.org/>

Family Foundation, and the governments of some countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, a geographic area where the United States is investing heavily in public diplomacy initiatives to seek to improve how they are perceived by the general population. It brings together governmental actors and philanthropic foundations who have long supported one another in the pursuing of an interconnected global market through education and development projects – for better or for worse (Pennycook, 1994/2017).

It may be the size of the United States and its geographical distance from other parts of the world, as well as factors such as the high cost and security concerns of international travel to certain regions which have made virtual exchange appealing not only to United States policy makers but also to educators in higher education and schools (De Wit, 2013; Rubin & Guth, 2015; Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008).

Virtual exchange was also happening in Europe, though no projects or initiatives appear on the timeline until 2005. What is known as telecollaboration in the field of foreign language education has been implemented in Europe by language teachers, often with partners in the United States, since the 1990's. This occurred very much in isolation, that is within the confines of the exchange partnership, not at institutional or organisational level. However, there has been considerable dissemination and exchange with fellow practitioners at conferences¹⁴ and through academic publications. Indeed, telecollaboration in higher education can be seen as a bottom-up or grassroots practice of individual practitioners, very often in language learning contexts, and not on the radar, even within their own institutions, let alone on a regional or national level (O'Dowd, 2011).

The first European initiative to appear on this timeline is eTwinning in 2005. This is relevant to the development of virtual exchange in higher education as it is the European Commission's flagship exchange programme for schools. On the website it defines itself as “the community for schools in Europe” which offers a “platform for staff working in a school in one of the European countries involved, to communicate, collaborate, develop projects, share and, in short, feel and be part of the most exciting learning community in Europe”¹⁵. The main objectives were to promote school twinning as an opportunity for pupils to learn and practise information and communication technology skills and to promote awareness of European identity and citizenship. As of January 2018, according to the website, over 70,000 projects are running in classrooms across Europe, with 190,000 registered schools. eTwinning projects may be seen as a form of virtual exchange, though there is not always direct contact between pupils in the different classes. Another European platform

14. In Europe this has been largely through EUROCALL and the UNICollaboration conferences, regional workshops, and proceedings.

15. <https://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm>

on the timeline is [EPALE](#)¹⁶ which is a community for professionals working in adult learning across Europe. This platform, dated 2015, is not directly related to virtual exchange as it is based largely on sharing content and information about projects, resources, and events.

Another European project on the timeline is the INTENT Project, which began in 2011, funded by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning programme. The project was based on the premise that virtual exchange (referred to as online intercultural exchange) was having a very limited impact in higher education, due to fragmentation, challenges that practitioners faced and a lack of institutional support on both national and European levels¹⁷. Although the project itself ended in 2014, there are several possible reasons why this short-term initiative drew the attention of policy makers:

- it gathered large-scale evidence, mapping, if you like, the 'state of the art' of telecollaboration in Europe ([Guth, 2016](#); [Guth, Helm, & O'Dowd, 2014](#); [Helm, 2015](#));
- it proved to be sustainable beyond the life of the project with the creation of a platform for virtual exchange¹⁸ for educators working in higher education, the establishment of the organisation UNICollaboration which brings together a community of practitioners and researchers, and this Journal of Virtual Exchange ([O'Dowd, 2018](#)).

The position paper developed by UNICollaboration on virtual exchange¹⁹ also features on the timeline, perhaps as it was the first European initiative of this nature. The position paper was an attempt to 'translate' the research knowledge acquired through the project and two decades of practice and research in the field for decision makers. It also sought to highlight the relevance of virtual exchange outside the realm of foreign language education, but as a tool for the internationalisation of any curricula.

The position paper called for:

- a coherent strategy for virtual exchange in higher education on European, national, and institutional levels in order to mitigate fragmentation and enhance consolidation of

16. EPALE is an initiative of the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture of the European Commission.

17. This 30-month project had two key aims, to raise greater awareness among students, educators and (senior) managers at university level of online intercultural exchange as a pedagogical model serving the goal of virtual exchange in foreign language education, and to achieve more effective integration in university institutions.

18. <https://uni-collaboration.eu>

19. <https://uni-collaboration.eu/node/996>

approaches and resources that will enable this practice to be mainstreamed in higher education;

- a system of grants for virtual exchanges to cover the costs for the development and implementation of innovative online exchange projects;
- the integration of virtual exchanges as an important component of quality higher education curricula, and their recognition with credits and inclusion in the European Diploma Supplement; and
- support for more research into measuring the impact of virtual intercultural exchange programs (UNICollaboration, 2014, n.p.).

It drew the support of scholars of international education (De Wit, 2016), virtual exchange organisations such as the Sharing Perspectives Foundation, and some European universities, and has been referenced in various policy-related documents, including a report for the European Parliament and the Feasibility Study (De Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Eggen-Polak, 2015; PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017). This position paper highlights an important move outside of the academic sphere and an attempt to speak and communicate in languages which are relevant and understandable to different target groups, policy makers above all.

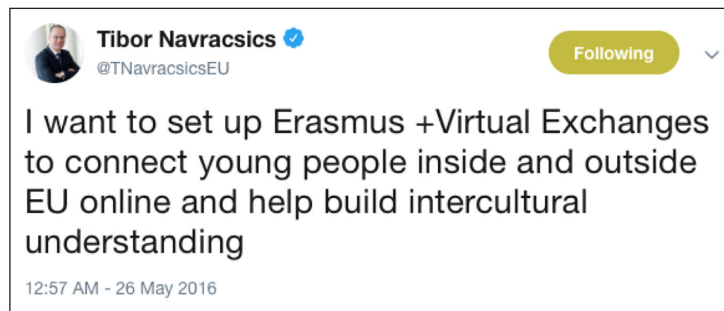
Both the establishment of the Virtual Exchange Coalition and the UNICollaboration (2014) position paper can be seen as steps which attempted to bring together various stakeholders in the fields of higher education and virtual exchange to further the field. An important part of this was a convergence in the language used, which came from a recognition that the differences in terminology have perhaps contributed to the fragmentation in the field and lack of understanding about virtual exchange. The debate and dialogue around terminology, practices, and beliefs – what brings us together and also what distinguishes us (amply discussed in O'Dowd, 2018) proved to be enriching, as well as challenging at times. However, it is not unusual that different traditions in disciplines (ranging from healthcare to education) lack a common terminology, groups often have their own terms, or their own perceptions of the same terminology. Indeed terminology science has become an academic discipline in itself and informs the development of terminology policies or strategies for organizations (Kockaert & Steurs, 2014).

The timeline ends with the first mention of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange – which in this timeline we see as dating to 2016. This is when Commissioner Navracsics first launched the idea in a tweet (see Figure 2 below).

The feasibility study was carried out (PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017) soon after this announcement, entailing interviews with several virtual exchange stakeholders, many of whom

are linked to the organisations and platforms mentioned in the timeline. One of the conclusions of the feasibility study was that no single organisation had the capacity to implement the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project as envisioned by the European Commission.

Figure 2. Tweet by the European Commissioner for education, culture, youth, and sport about Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange



2.1. Virtual exchange, international education, and soft power

Some of the episodes that I have explored in the section above highlight the Commission's interest in virtual exchange as a tool that has the potential to meet the political and societal agenda of making constructive connections between people across cultural and physical borders. Indeed, as is explicitly mentioned in the feasibility study (PPMI & [Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017](#)), Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, like the Erasmus Mobility programme, is considered to be an element of the European Union's soft power and public diplomacy.

According to Joseph [Nye \(1990, 2004\)](#), soft power is a tool for public diplomacy, that is how nations seek to secure influence overseas by persuasion or attraction rather than by military force, threats, or economic sanctions. A nation's soft power is the attractiveness of its culture, political ideals, and policies, "[w]hen our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced" ([Nye, 2004](#), p. 105). In his view, the success of public diplomacy depends on three dimensions:

- daily communication, which involves explaining the context of domestic and foreign policy (including elements like foreign press);
- strategic communication, in which a set of themes is developed, much like what occurs in a political or advertising campaign (branding of central themes or advancing a particular government policy); and

- the development of lasting relationships with key individuals over many years through scholarships, exchanges, training, seminars, conferences, and access to media. (Nye, 2004, in PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017, p. 142).

It is this last dimension which education addresses and international exchange programmes (including virtual exchange) are seen as being powerful tools of soft power. In the post-war era, the United States has been the greatest influence in this respect, consolidating itself as a “neocolonial power” through a range of political, economic, academic, and cultural institutions and the administration of awards and scholarships (Pennycook, 1994/2017, p. 153). The United States’ Fulbright programme, for example, is perhaps the most famous, and was established shortly after World War II “to encourage mutual understanding between Americans and people from other countries”²⁰ – currently over 160. The global spread of English language is also seen as an instrument of soft power, supported by the rise of the Internet which, it is argued, has become an international system in which the United States has “undoubted hegemony” (Rose, 2005, p. 5).

The Internet has clearly had an impact on the exercise of soft power in all of Nye’s dimensions. Governments are beginning to employ digital ambassadors, Denmark and France being amongst the first (Sandre, 2017). Interactions between states are occurring at unprecedented speed. Even more significant perhaps is the increasing power that non-governmental organisations can wield through the Internet (Rose, 2005, p. 6).

Yet educational uses of technology for digital diplomacy and cultural exchange are slow to draw attention. Online and offline journals²¹ dealing with digital diplomacy are currently dominated by Blockchain, Fake News, and CyberSecurity. According to Manor (2018),

“[a]s is the case with other fields of diplomacy, contemporary studies of digital public diplomacy have also adopted a negative prism in which public diplomacy is reduced to a tool for contesting narratives, fighting disinformation through recruited networks and influencing the world views and behaviors of audiences” (para. 3).

In recent years a small number of articles addressing virtual exchange as a form of soft power have been published citing the potential of virtual exchange as a form of citizen diplomacy: “[v]irtual exchange is changing the how and who of exchange, and may well prove itself to be a viable

20. <https://www.dw.com/en/fulbright-exchange-program-battles-white-house-antipathy/a-43008933>

21. See for example <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/virtual-exchange-evolution-citizen-diplomacy>

extension of public diplomacy, and a new means of building and exerting soft power in foreign affairs” (Helland, 2017, para. 3).

The term soft power is often used with positive connotations – usually by those wielding power, who see it as a tool for securing their influence overseas – by non-military means. Soft power was key in the rise and maintenance of the 19th-century British Empire, and also in the rise of the United States’ power after the end of the second world war (Holm, 2016). Many international relations scholars claim that since the end of the Cold War soft power has come to be of even greater importance than hard power (Muedini, 2018). However, we could also look at education and soft power through the lens of postcolonialism (Andreotti & Souza, 2016) which is not so unapologetically celebratory about the wielding of power – whether ‘hard’ or ‘soft’. With reference to the American context, Tayla Zemach-Bersin (2007) argues that internationalisation of higher education and study abroad programmes are intended to recuperate America’s waning reputation due to the government’s response to the World Trade Center attacks of 9/11 and claim to promote understanding and global citizenship. Yet, she highlights,

“the discourse of study abroad surreptitiously reproduces the logic of colonialism, legitimizes American imperialist desires, and allows for the interests of U.S. foreign policy to be articulated through the specious rhetoric of global universality. Though presented with an appealing veneer of multicultural understanding and progressive global responsibility, the current discourse of study abroad is nationalistic, imperialistic, and political in nature” (Zemach-Bersin, 2007, p. 17).

Erasmus+ student mobility and now virtual exchange is somewhat less hegemonic in terms of soft power than exchange programmes promoted by institutions like Fulbright in the United States or the British Council in the United Kingdom, because it is based on principles of reciprocity and mutual exchange rather than a single hegemon driven by neoliberal markets or political imperatives. The European Union is an interdependent system in which no member state has the hard or the soft power to dominate all the others (Rose, 2005), though of course there are clearly power asymmetries. As regards its external relations, however, Europe’s foreign policy is clearly Eurocentric and often accused of neo-colonial and/or neo-Orientalist orientations and representations (Dimitrovova & Kramsch, 2017; Pasture, 2018).

Student mobility has been a tool used to strengthen the sense of European identity and since its launch over 30 years ago, the Erasmus programme has proved to be one of the most popular European projects. The power of student mobility to increase young people’s curiosity, develop an international mindset and equip them with transversal skills which support their employability was

recognised in the Erasmus Impact Study (Brandenburg et al., 2014) which had a stronger focus on employability skills than intercultural understanding. In 2015, the Erasmus+ programme expanded to neighbouring regions including the Southern Mediterranean. Though this has been welcomed by universities in both Europe and the Southern Mediterranean region, there has been concern as regards the distribution of the scholarships in the different South Mediterranean countries, the limited number of grants which does not match the number of requests, security risks for students on both sides, and finally the difficulty that youth from South Mediterranean countries have in obtaining visas from some European countries (Delpero, 2018).

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange seeks to build upon the symbolic capital of the Erasmus programme. As the European Commission announced in the press release, “Erasmus+, one of the EU’s iconic and most successful programmes, today adds an online version to its mobility actions, to link more students and young people from European countries and the Southern neighbourhood of the EU” (European Commission, 2018a, n.p.). The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project is thus framed as a project which promotes not only internal, intra-European, but above all external relations with a specific area – Southern Mediterranean countries.

According to this press release, the project is intended “to promote intercultural dialogue and improve the skills of at least 25,000 young people through digital learning tools over the next two years” (European Commission, 2018a, n.p.). There is both a relational and an economic rationale behind the project. This duality between discourses which focus on economic and intercultural relations is found in many European policy documents, for example language-in-education policies (Liddicoat, 2013).

There is also a recognition that Erasmus has been somewhat limited in reach, particularly as regards the opportunities offered by Erasmus+ to young people outside of formal education. Virtual exchange is thus presented as a way to achieve greater accessibility and also to enhance social inclusion by involving young people from different social backgrounds. In his statement reported in the press release, Navracsics said

“[w]hile a very successful programme, Erasmus+ is not always accessible to everyone. Through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange we will facilitate more contacts between people, reach youth from different social backgrounds and promote intercultural understanding. This online tool will connect more young people from the EU with their peers from other countries; it will build bridges and help develop skills such as critical thinking, media literacy, foreign languages and teamwork” (European Commission, 2018a, n.p.).

The document makes explicit reference to the Paris Declaration which calls on Member States to act in order to strengthen the role of intercultural dialogue in education and learning environments. This declaration came shortly after the so-called ‘Paris Attacks’, one of a series of terror attacks which occurred in Europe and which have led to the contestation, reconfiguring, and defence of notions of identity and belonging. Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange stems from a policy that aims to address what the European Commission sees as some of the main problems characterising today’s societies in Europe and their relations with South Mediterranean countries, as is clearly stated in the legal and policy framework behind this project.

Educators often express discomfort when faced with the political dimension of education ([Pennycook, 1994/2017](#)) and virtual exchange ([Helm, 2015](#)), but it is important to remember that ALL education is political, even maintaining the status quo. As [Pennycook \(1994/2017\)](#) writes,

“[n]o knowledge, no language and no pedagogy is ever neutral or apolitical. To teach critically, therefore, is to acknowledge the political nature of all education; it is not to take up some ‘political’ stance that stands in contradistinction to a ‘neutral’ position” (p. 301).

He argues for an understanding of politics as infused in everyday life as we struggle to make meanings for ourselves and others and calls for greater engagement with both local and global contexts, and with other cultural and political actors ([Pennycook, 1994/2017](#)).

Once we recognise the political dimension of our work, it becomes important to be aware of the kind of relationships it is that we are establishing, how we build these relations and the power dynamics that exist and are negotiated within them. Relations can be consciously and/or unconsciously coercive but they can also be based on principles of mutuality and reciprocity. They can be superficial and lead to banal essentialisms ([Piller, 2016](#)), reinforcing negative stereotypes and ethnocentric attitudes; but they can also be transformative, leading to a greater awareness of one’s own situatedness and can open up the way to further search for encounters that will shape our knowledge and identities.

2.2. Linking research to policy and practice – the road ahead

In previous UNICollaboration conferences, keynote speakers have drawn on research and/or practice to make recommendations that we should keep in mind as we move forward and as our research informs policy makers.

Shamil [Idriss \(2014\)](#) from the Virtual Exchange Coalition called on us to act collectively for the common cause rather than pursuing our own agendas for the sake of moving forward the field of

virtual exchange. This collective behaviour has indeed borne fruits in the form of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project which brings together practitioners with experiences of different models of virtual exchange. This is leading to a cross-pollination of experience and collaboration in the experimentation of new models. For example, predominantly asynchronous telecollaborative models of virtual exchange designed by partner teachers are currently being integrated with small group synchronous dialogue sessions on a video conferencing platform with the support of Erasmus+ trained facilitators. This allows participants to interact with one another in a novel way and seeks to engage them in conversations which might not spontaneously occur between participants when left to their own devices. Despite the logistic challenges this presents, the feedback from students has thus far been largely positive and this approach will be further developed in the second year of this pilot project. Furthermore, the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange team will seek to engage with educators implementing these exchanges to understand the challenges they face, the opportunities they see in having their activity fall within the Erasmus framework, and also to seek collaborative and participatory research partnerships in order “to incorporate people and perspectives from as many contexts as possible in the very construction, development and promotion” (Bali & Sharma, 2014, n.p.) of these initiatives.

Mike Byram (2014) reminded us of the commodification of higher education and how language education, but also virtual exchange, I would argue, risks being servant to the market-driven imperatives of internationalisation. One of the reasons why there is interest now in virtual exchange is because it ticks all the right boxes in terms of ‘internationalisation of higher education’, in particular internationalisation of the curriculum (De Wit, 2016; Leask, 2015; Leask & De Wit, 2016). However virtual exchange, like internationalisation is a means to an end (De Wit, 2016) and too often we focus on the process itself, the technicalities of virtual exchange, rather than reflecting deeply on our aims.

Andreotti and Souza (2008) offer educators a reflective tool to help us reflect on this based on different ways of viewing the world. A modernist or Newtonian view sees it as a system with fixed rules and structures, based on universalist assumptions. To prepare young people for this kind of world education system would have students absorb specific knowledge and/or nurture those skills which will support the realisation of this society. In this type of world, interpretations that were not in line with this view would be either suppressed or ignored.

If, on the other hand, we see global society as diverse, inter-connected, multi-faceted, and in constant flux, if we see that transformations take place as different parts and systems interact with one another, we can understand that it is relations within and between systems which drive change and we need to navigate these systems and the relations within and between them. The diversity of this world

is represented by different meanings and interpretations, ways of seeing and knowing. Equipping young people for this type of world means exposing them to different models of thinking, strategies for establishing relationships, shifting positions and perspectives according to changing contexts, and being able to live with and navigate complexity and uncertainty. This entails unpredictability, moving out of one's comfort zones, and engaging with productive conflict.

Marie-Noelle [Lamy \(2014\)](#) alerted us to the importance of constantly questioning the assumptions on which our practice is based, for example the way we define culture, cultural identities, and communities. Virtual exchange should allow educators and participants to recognise the partiality, context dependency, and heterogeneity of our perspectives. The mutual engagement that we seek to foster should also be combined with tools of analysis that allow participants to take account of power relations between participants, the complexity of the process of construction of culture and identity, and an understanding of the social-historical processes and encounters that have contributed to these constructions ([Bali & Sharma, 2014](#); [Souza & Andreotti, 2009](#)). We need to resist the temptation to make culture “an undisturbed space of harmony and agreement where social relations exist within cultural forms of uninterrupted accords” ([McLaren, 1992](#), quoted in [bell hooks, 1994](#), p. 31).

Celèste [Kinging \(2016\)](#) shared research about some of the factors which researchers have found to inhibit the potential of study abroad for student learning such as difficulty in connecting with local social networks, lack of exposure to discourses about ‘foreigner identities’, and reacting to this by ‘positioning themselves within newly salient national identities’. She highlighted the potential of telecollaborative virtual exchange as a form of ‘prior socialisation’ to prepare students to face some of these issues. During this pilot year of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, several projects have been developed by educators precisely for this purpose. For example one exchange was designed on an already tested model ([Giralt & Jeanneau, 2016](#)) for students in Ireland and Spain preparing to go on Erasmus mobility. Also, an exchange was developed within the context of a youth worker project, Pathways to Leadership, which blends residential training with virtual exchange. Blended programmes that combine virtual exchange with study abroad are set to be an important component of the Commission’s Erasmus 2021-2027, as has already been announced ([European Commission, 2018b](#)). At the same time, the value of virtual exchange in its own right as a complementary approach will continue to be experimented and its comparability to physical mobility in terms of learning outcomes will be explored ([Van der Velden, Millner, & Van der Heijden, 2016](#)), as well as the competencies (for example digital skills) that virtual exchange specifically addresses.

Andreas [Müller-Hartmann \(2016\)](#) reminded us that we should not lose sight of pedagogical goals in our virtual exchange activity, and David [Little \(2016\)](#) asked:

“[w]ill emerging telecollaborative practice contribute to the evolution of a new learning-and-teaching dynamic that extends learners’ identity and their capacity for agentive behaviour, or will it simply add some extra limbs to a pedagogical tradition that has long been sclerotic?” (p. 54).

But what do we see as ‘agentive behaviour’?

In a globally connected world where rather than seek contact with groups of people who differ from us we tend to keep to our silos or ‘echo chambers’ (Paolini et al., 2018), we might conceive of ‘agentive behaviour’ as actively seeking contact with members of diverse groups, engaging with diversity in real settings. Researchers in the field of social psychology who have been exploring Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis have found a strong research base to support intergroup contact as “a way to improve troubled intergroup dynamics” (Paolini et al., 2018, p. 12). Whilst some studies have found that negative interactions can dampen interest and compromise future engagement, social psychologists have expressed greater concern in recent years as regards the phenomenon of ‘contact avoidance’ because they see this as one of the greatest challenges we are facing.

“Why are intergroup friction and prejudiced attitudes so prominent at a time when intergroup contact can be an everyday experience for most global citizens? Why are rich opportunities for contact in our diverse world not producing the widespread, enduring and desirable integration outcomes predicted by intergroup contact research?” (Paolini et al., 2018, p. 3).

Clearly there are multiple possible answers to this complex question and a host of invisible barriers. Virtual exchange can be seen as a way of fostering positive contact in a safe environment that can fuel interest in further contact. In the post-exchange surveys carried out after the first Erasmus+ exchanges, it has been found that 86% of respondents are interested in further Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities, 82% of respondents report increased knowledge of the relationship between and across their societies, and 65% of respondents report increased self-awareness about stereotypes/biases they hold about another group²². Though this data consists of self assessment, it is important because it supports the argument that virtual exchange can enhance students’ capacity for this kind of agentive behaviour. Further research, both qualitative and quantitative, is currently being carried out²³.

22. https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/impact-erasmus-virtual-exchange_pl

23. Reports will be made available on the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange impact page https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/impact-erasmus-virtual-exchange_pl

As regards the teaching and research community, agentive behaviour might entail a similar approach, actively seeking contact and engaging with educators and researchers from different sociocultural contexts, academic disciplines and research approaches as well as different geographic areas. [Paolini et al. \(2018\)](#) also call on those in the research community seeking to encourage intergroup contact to consider how to generate “persuasive and engaging messages that counter the voices of segregation in politics, traditional media, and social media” (p. 12). Though it may take us out of the comfort zone of the research and practice community, engaging with decision-makers and the field of policy-making is an important way of doing this. At a time when right-wing politicians are opposing the extension of the Erasmus+ programme, in particular to North African countries²⁴ ([Helm & Acconcia, 2018](#)), increasing opportunities for intercultural exchange is fundamental. As [Cummins \(2000\)](#) writes, “the discourses of national and religious identity, and the historical myths that sustain them, risk implosion when contact and dialogue replace isolation and monologue” (p. 10).

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24. https://www.corriere.it/scuola/universita/18_settembre_18/niente-erasmus-nord-africa-lega-si-oppone-scambi-studenti-9beb247a-bb34-11e8-bdaa-50b21d428469.shtml

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